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FROM

Prof. Willis A. Boughton







# **THE GRIP OF FEAR**



# **THE GRIP OF FEAR**

**BY**  
**MAURICE LEVEL**



**NEW YORK: MITCHELL KENNERLEY**  
**1911**

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# THE GRIP OF FEAR

## I

### THE FIRST INSPIRATION

**“SO** that’s settled,” said Monsieur Ledoux, still standing on the doorstep; “the first night you are disengaged, you let me know, and come and dine?”

“All right; and thank you again for the delightful evening.”

“Nonsense. The pleasure has been mine. . . . Wrap yourself up; it is quite cold to-night. You know the way? Down the Boulevard Lannes as far as the Avenue Henri-Martin. If you walk fast you may still catch the last train. . . . By the by, you ought to have a revolver. This isn’t a very safe part of the town. . . .”

“Oh! that’s all right; thank you, I have



one. You know, I'm used to Paris after dark, and a journalist has to learn how to take care of himself. Don't come any further; the moonlight is so clear I can find my way perfectly. Good-bye. . . ."

Onesimus Coche crossed the pavement and started walking briskly down the middle of the boulevard; when he reached the first turning he heard his host's voice calling out cheerfully:

"Au revoir. Don't be long before you come again."

He turned round and replied:

"Indeed I won't. Good-night."

Monsieur Ledoux was still standing on the steps and waving his hand. From the passage behind him, all hung with andrinople and lit by a bright hall-lamp, came a shaft of rosy light.

There was a sense of homely comfort in the sight of the little sleepy garden and the small house with its closed shutters, revealed in that patch of light; and after the door was shut Onesimus Coche stood for a moment quite still, gazing back. Ten years of Paris life had

not sufficed to make him altogether forget his early days spent in a distant provincial town, or the long winter evenings and the familiar silent streets, where in spring-time, when the sap is rising, you seem to hear the crackling of the wood in the eaves and in the beams of the old houses on either side. Without quite knowing why, his thoughts travelled back to the cosy home of his childhood and to the old people he loved, who must be fast asleep by this time. An easy, uneventful life like theirs might have been his own if some demon had not attracted him to this great city of Paris. He had never had much luck here, and, after throwing himself in the fray with the spirit of one born to conquer, he had had to content himself with reporting for a daily paper.

He lit his cigarette and went on, more slowly.

A comfortable dinner and good old vintage wine disposed his mind to hopeful dreams long since forgotten. There was no sound to break into his thought, no familiar noise of engines, or rustle of paper, or smell of ink and rags and fat such as fills the air in the printing room—

and he seemed to see within reach of him, almost close at hand, the wonderful and fragile thing which he had learnt to despair of attaining—*glory!*

Once or twice before, as he sat with his elbows on the table, at a late hour, in a restaurant, under the flaring lights, amid the musty odours of food and the perfumes of women's toilettes, surrounded by constant movement and deafened by gipsy music, with dazed brain, with sight and hearing exasperated by the colours and the noise, he had experienced the same sudden and clear sense that he was "somebody," and that he had in himself the germ of great achievements. He had said to himself: "Ah! at this moment, if I had a pen, ink, and paper, I could write something immortal." Alas! at these mysterious times, when another self seems to spring into being and to transform the old self, the pen, the ink, and the paper are never at hand. . . .

And so now, in the stillness of the winter night, under the sharp caress of the wind, thoughts and memories played, as it were, vainly in this man's soul.

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Suddenly came the stroke of the hour: that sound at which all dreaming is dispelled.

"Bother!" he said, "half-past twelve; I have missed the last train. I'll be hanged if I can find a cab in this God-forsaken hole!"

He quickened his pace. The boulevard stretched endlessly before him, bounded on the left by small houses and on the right by the round, heavy mass of the fortifications. Here and there the street lamps cast their yellow light upon the pavement; nothing else had even the semblance of life, on this road, as it lay between the sleeping houses and little bands of grass and rows of leafless trees that did not even shiver in the night. There was something awe-inspiring in this absolute stillness and this unchanging silence. . . .

As he passed by the bastion occupied by the Army Police, Onesimus Coche slackened his pace and cast a glance in the direction of the sentry-box: it was empty. He walked on, skirting the wall. Behind the railing lay the courtyard, white with a clear whiteness, only broken here and there by the tiny black shadows of the pebbles. From the stables came

the rattling of the halters and the pawing of a horse in its box.

These sounds freed Onesimus Coche from the vague sense of anguish which had oppressed him since his father's door had closed upon him; and Onesimus Coche, the dreamer and the poet, vanished. There remained only Onesimus Coche, the indefatigable reporter, ready to start off at a moment's notice and to "interview," with the same self-assurance and the same cold smile, the explorer just back from the North Pole, and the porter who "thought he had seen the murderer go by." . . .

His cigarette had gone out. He took another from his pocket and stopped to light it. He was about to walk on when he saw three shadows advancing fast towards him along the railings. At any other time he would not even have troubled to look; but the lateness of the hour, the loneliness of this spot, and some strange instinct fixed his attention on them. Drawing back in the shadow of a tree, he stood watching.

At a later time he remembered that during this second, which was to mean so much in his

life, his senses were strangely sharpened. His eyes pierced the night, aware of a thousand details; his ear detected the slightest rustling. Although he was by nature courageous and even foolhardy, yet now he put his hand on his revolver and was relieved by the sense of security which it gave him to play with the trigger. A thousand confused thoughts crossed his brain. He saw quite clearly before his mind's eye things which had slept within him for years. For a few seconds he knew the anguish of the man in extremity of peril, who lives his whole life over again between one heart-beat and the next. He felt the awful and distinct warning of present, immediate danger, and was conscious of the desperate effort of the human machine by which muscles, senses and reason attain their maximum perfection for the defence of the whole man.

The shadows glided on, halting suddenly, then starting off again, advancing by quick, irregular bounds. Within a few steps of him they slackened their pace and stopped; and, by the light of the street-lamp, Coche took

in every detail of their appearance and watched their every movement.

They were a woman and two men. The smaller man carried in his arms a large bundle wrapped up in blue rags. The woman turned her head to right and left, listening. As if fearing the presence of some invisible witness, the man with the bundle and the woman drew back out of the circle of light. The other man did not move at first; then he made a step forward and, with his hands over his eyes, leaned against the lamp-post. He had a truly sinister aspect. His face was white and drawn, with sunken cheeks; and he pressed both large hands convulsively across it. A glistening lock of black hair fell over his forehead. Some blood had dripped between his fingers and over his moustache and lip and down over his cheek and neck on to his shirt-collar.

"Well," said the woman in a half-whisper, "what are you waiting for?"

He murmured: "It hurts. *Bon Dieu!*"

She came out of the shade and went up to him. The small man followed her, put down

his bundle, and murmured, shrugging his shoulders:

“What a fuss!”

“I should like to see *you* if you’d got what I have! There, look!”

He drew away his bloodstained hands. Under his matted hair was an enormous gash slashing his forehead open from right to left with a deep, gaping, bleeding wound. It severed the eyebrow, and the eyelid below it was so dark and swollen that you could scarcely see, as it opened and closed, a suspicion of a small dark thing, also covered with blood—the eye.

The woman, moved to pity, took her handkerchief and very gently sponged the wound. Then, as the blood, clotted for a moment, began to flow again, she tore the bundle open, and took some rags from it with which to dress the cut. The wounded man, clenching his teeth, and stamping his foot, held out his brutish face. The other one growled: “Don’t undo the parcel!”

“Well, upon my word!” said the woman,



turning her head, but still holding her hands over the wound.

The smaller man knelt down and made up the parcel again as best he could, twisting some projecting gold article. Then he got up, with his bundle under his arm, and waited. Only, when the other one's gash was dressed and the woman was about to wipe her hands on her apron, he said to her, looking her straight in the eyes:

"Hear, stop that! You don't wipe that sort of thing off; you *wash* it off! D'you hear?"

The trio started off again in the shadow and continued their way, close to the walls, without a word, running on tip-toe. Suddenly a branch fell on the pavement at their heels; they turned round with a start, all three like one man, fists clenched and head down. Coche caught one last glimpse of the red hair of the woman, the twisted mouth of the small man, and the horrible wounded face of the other, half hidden by the blood-stained rags. Then they bounded on, reached the grass by the fort, and were lost in the darkness. And Coche, who had known all the time the danger in which he stood, and

at one moment had said to himself, "If they see me I am a dead man," breathed freely. He let go his revolver, which he had not ceased from fingering during the whole scene, and, sure of being really alone, he began to think.

First of all he reflected how right his friend Ledoux had been in saying that this was not a safe place; and with the thought came into his mind a favourite saying of his, one which he had very often used as a striking close for his articles: "Our police service is thoroughly inefficient."

He considered what course of action to take, and decided to hurry back to the Avenue Henri-Martin. Why? For the mere pleasure, without profit or glory, of getting a stab in the back? Without knowing why, he started in that direction. But he had not walked four steps before his reporter's instinct—the instinct, as it were, of an amateur detective—gained the upper hand, and he came to a sudden standstill.

"The incomparable trio which I have just met," said he to himself, "are, I am sure, fresh from some crime. Of what kind? Was it

armed assault, or simply burglary? The wound of the first man seems to point to assault. . . . But the bulky package of the other one seems to prove conclusively that burglary is their trade. Road thieves robbing the belated passer-by can find at best money, papers, and jewellery—not a cumbersome load. People do not walk about carrying table silver and fancy articles; and, unless I am much mistaken, I saw some gold and silver in that bundle. I saw the face of a clock, too, and when the man put down the bundle I heard a jingle like that of table silver. As for the wound. . . . A quarrel over the sharing of the booty? . . . A fall against some hard and cutting body—the marble of a mantelpiece, or the glass of a door? . . . Quite likely. . . . In any case, burglary seems evident. And, if so, I have two alternatives. I can either retrace my steps full speed and try to follow the trail of the rascals; or else try to find the house into which they have broken. I have lost a full ten minutes, and by now the fellows are a good way off. Even supposing that I find them, alone against three I can do little; besides, it

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is not my business to capture them: we have paid agents for that. On the other hand, the task of finding out more about this mysterious business does certainly tempt my fancy. No one can have yet discovered the theft. I know exactly where the three came from, for my sight is good for three hundred yards, even in this light: I must have seen the shadows at about that distance away; from the moment I saw them the two men and the woman did not stop till they reached this lamp; I can therefore cover three hundred yards without hesitation. After that I will consider."

He started on his way without haste, turning round from time to time to see what distance he had covered. His step was about twenty-five inches. He counted four hundred steps and stopped. From that moment he stood on the possible scene of their action. If the theft had taken place before the Avenue Henri-Martin, he was quite sure he would find some traces of the three. He found himself before a small, closed garden-door. At the bottom of the garden was a house, and a light

showing behind the closed shutters. Coche did not even halt.

Everywhere the same stillness; not a trace could be detected of anything abnormal. He was beginning to despair when, happening to rest his hand on a door, he felt the door give way.

He raised his eyes; the house was dark and silent, and he thought its silence abnormally deep. However, he shrugged his shoulders and murmured to himself: "What now? What trick is my imagination playing on me, just when I need all my presence of mind? . . . And yet, why is this door not closed?"

The door had flown wide open. Onesimus saw the little garden with carefully-tended flower-beds, the earth neatly raked, and the light sand on the path, which seemed golden under the caress of the moon. A strange hesitation came over him, so marked that he decided to go in. . . . The whole thing was only a romance, so he began to think. The burglars were no doubt honest workmen returning home . . . they had perhaps been attacked by robbers. . . . After all, what had they said that

could justify his suspicions? Their whole demeanour was mysterious and sinister. But what of that? If some one were to see him now, appearing suddenly out of the darkness, would not even he look very startling?

The drama was becoming comic opera. True, the bundle must be accounted for; . . . but what if it only contained an alarum and some scraps of old tin? . . .

Night is a strange counsellor. It transforms objects and beings by casting on them fantastic shadows which the sun disperses. Fear, the handmaid of the Evil One, changes everything, making romances out of nothing—and foolish, childish romances at that. None of us knows exactly at what moment she enters into possession of our souls. She works there sometimes for hours while we still think that we are perfectly self-possessed; we think—*I want this, I want that.* . . . But Fear is all the time the real mistress in us. She has sat herself down sovereign and triumphant. We are altogether in her power; her grip seems to hold our throat. . . . Soon even our pride is conquered; a great shudder seizes and shakes

us; with a strange, desperate effort we try to escape from her hold—in vain: the bravest confess themselves conquered first. Dark, indeed, is the moment when we murmur the fatal words—I am afraid! But for hours our teeth have been chattering without our daring to recognise it.

Onesimus Coche took a step back and said aloud to himself: “You’re frightened, old boy.”

He waited a moment, trying to analyse the exact impression that the words made upon himself. Not a muscle in his body twitched. His hands remained quite still in his pockets; he did not even experience the fleeting surprise usually caused by the sound of one’s own voice out of the silence. He looked straight before him. Then suddenly he started; on the yellow sand of the path he had detected some footprints, outlined by a tiny shade, here quite separate and distinct, there covered one by another. He came back to the door, knelt down and picked up a little of the soil. It was dry sand, so fine and light that the slightest touch of wind would

disperse it. He half-opened his fingers and watched the sand fall, as light as powder. Suddenly all his doubts vanished, and with them all his theories on Fear and on the fantastic images that Fear may weave. His mind had never been clearer, he had never felt calmer than he did at this moment. His brain acted like a good workman who has put the last fashioning touch to his work, and now takes up the finished article with a steady hand, raises it to the level of his eye, and sees that it is complete and perfect.

He pulled himself together. All that for a moment had seemed to him an empty fancy now became in his mind more than probable—*sure*—fact. This which he had found was exact evidence. He abandoned hypothesis for a tangible proof which his imagination could no longer transform. From one deduction to another—they were strictly *logical* deductions this time—he reached the exact point which his instinct had reached long before. He thought:

“Somebody has trodden on the sand of this path; this must have been done quite recently, for the footprints are clear, and to-night’s



breeze would have dispersed them in an hour or two. Those men and the woman passed by this place. No one except themselves can have stepped over the threshold of this house. The key to the mystery lies, then, behind these silent walls in the darkness of the closely-shut-tered rooms."

Some invisible power pushed him forward.

He went in.

He advanced very cautiously, taking care not to tread over the footprints which he had seen. Although he knew that the slightest gust of wind might efface them at any moment, he was too conscious of their importance to destroy them himself. Without a thought the burglars had left, as it were, their personal seal; the merest tyro in the detective's art could not fail to take stock of these traces, and to avail himself of them for his inquiry. Coche could remember a thousand sensational cases in which much slighter indices had served as valuable clues: the story, for instance, of the criminal who was traced several years after his crime through a forgotten boot. And now he marvelled that his mind was so clear and so

quick after all the hesitation which had possessed him before; his reason seemed to have abdicated in favour of a kind of superior instinct which not only guided the boldest of his inductions, but also directed his slightest movement.

Thus, after walking barely ten steps, he arrived at the door of the house. He who a moment ago would have been quite unnerved by the thought of meeting a shadow or a face, he who for a while had not dared to formulate his suspicions even to himself, now felt not the least surprise on finding that the door opened easily when he turned the handle. And yet, from the point of view of common sense, surely it was less surprising that the people of the house should have forgotten to shut the gate rather than the hall door. A gate, at the best of times, presents only a very slight difficulty for any one wishing to pass in; and the first comer could with no effort have got on to that particular garden wall and let himself down noiselessly into the garden. But a hall door can afford a protection enough to make it worth while to fasten it securely before re-

tiring for the night. This very simple course of reasoning did not even occur to Coche; any more than did the fear of being himself taken for a burglar, and received as such.

Nevertheless, when he heard the echo of his own steps in the corridor, he stopped for a moment. He fumbled in his pocket for a match: his box was empty! He murmured: "Can't be helped," and took out his revolver. And then he went on, groping with his arms out and his hands open, guiding himself by the contact with a very cold wall, so damp that it felt sticky to the touch. Suddenly this guide failed him, and he was left groping in empty space. He put out one foot, then the next; it fell upon something softer than the stone flags in the corridor. He bent down and felt with his hands; there was a step, and then a carpet, agreeable to the touch after the dampness of the wall. He straightened himself and put his hand on the bannister; the wood creaked. Scarcely knowing how he did it, without stopping to inquire why, he was on his way to the first floor. He made no attempt at inspecting the ground floor first. He started

to climb the stairs. He counted twelve steps; then came a small landing, and he began to feel along the wall again; there was still nothing but a smooth surface. He went on climbing; he counted up twelve steps again, and after these he felt the ground flat before him: this was the next floor of the house—the way was open. Now he must try to discover something of his whereabouts, and—more important still, if he wanted to avoid being killed—he must announce his presence.

The owner, or owners, of this house must be sleeping very soundly, thought Coche, if they had not heard his footsteps before now. The stairs had creaked many times under his feet. Even the door, notwithstanding his precautions, had creaked when he shut it. Who could tell whether there wasn't a man standing silently somewhere ready to spring upon him, and perhaps to fire? By his present procedure he risked no less than his life. He therefore said, very softly so as not to frighten any one:

“Any one there?”

No answer.

He repeated a little louder:

"Is any one there?"

After a short pause he added:

"Don't be afraid; open. . . ."

No answer.

"Upon my word," thought he, "they are sleeping soundly in here, and no mistake!—I had not thought of that. It makes it much more awkward. However, I don't mean to get myself maimed just for the love of my art."

He thought a moment, and then said, very loudly:

"Open! It's the Police."

The sound of that word "Police" made him smile. Whatever had made him think of announcing himself as the Police? Onesimus Coche in the Police! Onesimus Coche, who spent his whole time collecting instances of Police mismanagement, poking fun at the agents of law and order; *he* was now reduced to appropriating their title! It was rather a joke. The Police (and this time he could not help laughing outright) were far from having any thought of him or of the burglars! At that very moment, a good way off from the place

where he stood, two very sleepy policemen were pacing up and down the law-abiding thoroughfares, with their hoods drawn up and their hands in their pockets. At the police-stations, near a rumbling stove, amid a smell of pipes, of hot plaster, of wet linen and leather, other policemen, astride of wooden benches, were playing manilla with those rough, greasy cards that cling to one's fingers—just waiting to collar some belated pickpocket, or the milkman caught in the act of “baptizing” his goods—that was all the Police were good for!—Indeed, he, Onesimus Coche, was now what the Police ought always to be—the vigilant and faithful, skilful and resolute guardian, effectively watching over the safety of the virtuous. What a comparison! what a lesson! . . . He could just *see* the article he would write next day; and he rejoiced at the thought of how it would make the Police authorities feel.

He, a mere journalist, would teach them their trade! The article should have a sensational head-line; it would commence with something striking, continue with something unexpected. . . . What an article it should be!

But the magic word—"the Police"—remained unanswered like the rest. Not a whisper broke the majestic silence of the place. Coche bethought him that his trick had failed and that he still stood in considerable danger. One thing, however, reassured him. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he began, little by little, to distinguish the things around him, and soon saw a faint glimmer of light a few steps in front of him. He walked forward and found himself by a window. A thin ray of moonlight peeped in through a chink in the closed shutters. Between the bars of the French blinds he saw a little strip of garden and another darker strip that must be the boulevard. But he did not stop to enjoy the pleasure of the moonlight or of the few stars that besprinkled the sky. Nothing was less suited to his fiery temperament than this silence and the slow, cautious manner of advance which he had been forced to adopt. He had been by turns patient, crafty, timid, almost cowardly. . . . But there is an end to all things. He had come into this house to *learn* something, and he was going to learn it.

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He turned about, put his hand up to the wall, went on, groping, more boldly. At last he came upon a door; then he took hold of the handle, pulling it towards himself to make sure that nobody could open suddenly from the inside, and he shouted rather than said:

“Steady! Don’t be afraid and don’t shoot!”

He counted three, and then, receiving no answer, he plunged into the room. He expected to be met by resistance; on the contrary, carried too far by his own impetus, he fell face forward and struck his forehead against something hard. He put out his hand to save himself; and in so doing he knocked against a chair, which fell with a great clatter upon the floor.

“This time,” he said, “with all this noise, they *must* hear me at last.”

But when the crash had subsided, still no sound was heard—not a whisper came through the night, not a breath reached his ear.

“Hullo,” he thought, “the burglars were better prepared than I was. The cage is empty, and they knew; they did their business in perfect comfort. That’s why they did not



even shut the doors after them, as well-trained workmen would. That's how I got in so easily."

There was an electric switch by his hand; he turned the light on. It burst out on a large room, for a moment overpowering and blinding Coche's tired eyes. When at last he was able to look, his glance fell upon a sight so unforeseen and so horrible that Coche felt his hair stand on end and was scarcely able to restrain a shriek of wild terror.

The place was in a state of mad disorder. A cupboard stood wide open on one side of the room, showing disordered piles of linen, and sheets half fallen from the shelves as if they were torn, all covered with red blotches. The drawers stood open, and one could see that the papers and old clothes and old boxes that now littered the floor had been kept in there. Near the curtain, on the wall hung with some light-coloured material, was spread the print of a red hand, with all the fingers stretched open and wide apart. The glass over the mantelpiece, cracked from top to bottom, was broken in the middle; and a few

splinters of glass lay sparkling on the floor. On the dressing-table rag-ends of clothes and pieces of string, and crumpled-up envelopes were scattered untidily. The red-tinged water which filled the basin had overflowed, and pools of the same colour lay on the white marble slab. A crumpled-up towel bore traces of blood. Everything was pillaged, everything was red. Coche's feet treading upon the carpet made a sound like the crunching of sand on the sea-shore when the tide is rising. Last of all, lying across the bed, with his arms crossed, gripping the neck of a bottle, pieces of which had cut into his hand, was stretched an old man with his throat cut open from ear to chest-bone by a horrible gash. The blood had welled out on to the pillows, the sheets, the walls, and the furniture in a violent outrush. In the crude light, in the horrible silence, this room where everything was red, where everywhere blood had set its seal, looked no longer like a room, but like a charnel-house.

Onesimus Coche saw the whole with one horrified glance, and his terror was such that he was obliged to lean against the wall, or he

would have fallen, then to summon all his self-command, or he would have fled. A hot wave rushed to his face, he was shaken by a long shudder, and an icy sweat broke out over his body.

He had before now looked upon many terrible sights—out of curiosity, or by chance, or by reason of his profession, yet never had he felt a horror like this; for never until now had he come upon such a spectacle without knowing what he was about to see, or at least realising that he was about to see “something.” Besides, on all other occasions he had had the companionship of other men, sustaining his courage and overcoming his loathing by that human contact which gives courage to the most faint-hearted. This was the first time that he had found himself unexpectedly and alone in the presence of death. . . . And of what a death! . . .

He straightened himself. The broken mirror reflected his likeness before him; he looked ghastly pale, with deep black rings round his eyes; his dry lips were half-opened by a fearful, convulsive smile, and on his forehead,

moist with perspiration, near his right temple, which was streaked by a thin line of blood, there was a red spot.

At first, forgetting the knock which he had received when he first fell into the room, he thought that the spot was on the mirror and not on himself. He moved his head to one side, but the spot followed his movement; then he grew horribly afraid. He was no longer made afraid by death, by silence, or by this murder, but was seized with the dim, strong fear of some supernatural occurrence, of a kind of madness, suddenly breaking out within him. He almost hurled himself towards the mantelpiece, and, clutching at the marble with his hand, craning his neck, he looked at himself. Then he breathed more freely. With a closer vision of himself his memory returned; he felt the pain of his bruise, and was almost glad that it hurt. He took his handkerchief and wiped the blood that had run down over his cheek on to his collar. The scratch was insignificant: a small, clean cut of less than an inch, which had bled a great deal, as face wounds always do, and which was now sur-

rounded by a pink and purplish bruise scarcely larger than a florin. And now—it was barely a minute since his first entrance into the room—he thought again of the motionless body stretched upon the bed, of the hideous gash he had seen, of the terrified face plunged amid the whiteness of the sheets, with the chin thrown forward, the neck strained as if offering itself to a new onslaught—that image reflected in the glass near his own. He made his way to the bed, crushing bits of glass as he walked, and he bent over the body to look.

There was scarcely any blood round the head, but the neck and shoulders lay in a congealed pool. With infinite precaution, almost tenderness, he took the head in his hands and raised it a little: the wound opened wider, like some horrible human mouth, letting a few drops of blood rise with a tiny ripple. A thick clot adhered to the hair and was stretched by the movement of the head. He put the head down again gently. It had preserved, in death, an unspeakable expression of fear; the eyes, not yet quite quenched, had an extraordinary fixity in their gaze. The glare of the

light lit up in them two little flames, round which Onesimus Coche saw two small images, scarcely dimmed, that were images of himself: for the last time, the mirror of those eyes, over which had passed the faces of the murderers, reflected a human countenance. Death had done its work; the heart had ceased from beating; the ears heard no longer; the last cry had been uttered by those convulsed lips; the last death-rattle had welled up against the barrier of the teeth covered with foam. . . . The still warm flesh of this man would never again be made to thrill either under the caress of a kiss or by the sharpness of pain.

Suddenly, between this dead man and himself, there rose another picture: that of the trio on the Boulevard Lannes. He saw the small man with his blue bundle, the wounded man with his swollen eye and scarce human countenance, the woman with her bare head. . . . He heard the short, brutal voice saying: "*You wash that, you don't wipe it.*" And the drama appeared to him with terrible distinctness. Whilst the woman kept watch the two men, after picking the locks to get in, had run up

to the first floor, where they knew they would find some valuables. The old man, overtaken in his sleep, had shouted, and the burglars had jumped upon him; he, to defend himself, had armed himself with a bottle and, hitting haphazard, had struck one of his assailants on the forehead. The struggle had continued for a few seconds longer, to judge by all the blood that had been shed and all the furniture that had been overturned. . . . At last the victim had stood at bay by the bed; one of the men had then seized him by his collar, where the red marks were still visible, and had held him on his back while the other, with a single stroke, had cut his throat. Then had come the looting, the feverish search for money and papers and valuables; then flight. . . .

Onesimus Coche turned round to *look* at the whole scene as he could picture it on this very spot. There were three glasses on the table with the remains of some wine. Not immediately after their horrible crime had the murderers taken to flight; certain of being quite alone now, they had sat down to drink. Then

they had washed and wiped their hands, calmly. . . .

A sudden fury welled up in the soul of the reporter. He clenched his fists and blurted out: "Blackguards! Fiends!"

What was he to do now? Go and fetch somebody? Call?—what was the use of that? All was over. No one could undo this horrible deed. He remained there motionless, besotted, his mind filled by the vision of the murder. Suddenly his thoughts fled after the assassins. He imagined them seated in some low hovel, sharing the booty, handling the stolen things with their red-stained fingers. For a second time he said between his teeth: "Blackguards! Fiends!"

A strong desire seized him to find them again, to see them—no longer triumphant and brutal as they must have been when they sat at this table near his body—but oppressed, livid, almost convulsed, in the dock, between policemen. He pictured to himself what their horrible faces would be like when they heard their death-warrant, and he pictured their walk to the scaffold in the early dawn, in the white



light of a ghostly morning. The law and the Police, the executioner, appeared to him awe-inspiring, terrible, and righteous. . . . Then, by a sudden recoil of thought, this law, this Police, this secular arm, became in his eyes as ridiculous puppets, the sport of any criminal. The Police, incapable of watching over the safety of citizens, were too clumsy to lay their hands on assassins. They caught one from time to time by pure chance, and because luck favoured them in the game. But for one rascal who was caught how many went scot-free! The Police have need, not of strong sinews, but of keen wits, of true artists, of men who see their duties less in the light of a profession than in that of a sport. Provided a criminal does not commit some enormous blunder, he is certain to remain free. The man who leaves nothing behind him may steal and kill with perfect security. When the crime is discovered, a search is made round the victim, there is a superficial inquiry into his habits of life, his papers are examined. If the murderer has never had anything to do with him before, after a few months' investigation, after an obstinate

police magistrate has kept under lock and key, some poor devil whose innocence is proved in the end, the whole business is shelved, and the criminals, emboldened by their success, start again, stronger this time and less easily tracked, because the clumsiness of the Police, whose labours they have followed with interest, has taught them the art of evasion.

And yet, what profession can be more absorbing than that of the man-hunter? To live over a whole drama in its smallest details, only following a clue scarcely perceptible to any other man! From a footprint, from a slip of paper, from the position of some insignificant article, to argue back and back to the source of events! To deduce, from the position of a body, the action of a murderer; from the wound, the murderer's profession and his strength; from the hour at which the crime was committed, the murderer's habit of life. . . . By the mere examination of facts, to build up again an hour as a naturalist builds up the whole picture of a prehistoric animal by the aid of a mere fragment of bone. . . . What a tremendous interest! and what a triumph! Can

the inventor know any greater?—he who for days and nights shuts himself up in his laboratory, relentlessly searching after the solution of a problem . . .? And the aim which *this* man pursues is a stationary, unchanging thing. He knows that certainty is one and unchanging; that events do not modify it; that every step forward brings him nearer to it;—he knows that he is advancing slowly but surely; that if the road he has chosen is the right one, the solution cannot, in the last resort, escape him. But see the police official; for him there is no rest; his portion is the clue that proves false, the aim hopefully pursued but always disappearing, the problem ceaselessly recast, with a solution that now approaches, now recedes, now seems to escape altogether out of the range of possibility;—his is the sudden stifling of a triumphant shout, the manifold abnormal life experiencing all hopes, all fears, and all disillusion; his is the struggle against everything and every one, requiring together the knowledge of the wise, the cunning of the hunter, the presence of mind of the leader of armies, the patience, the courage, and the ex-

quisite instinct that alone make great men, and alone cause great things. "Oh, for the wonderful experience of a bit of that life," thought Coche. "I would know those moments of triumph and live them; I would I were amid the unintelligent crowd of police who to-morrow will be on the scent—I, the only detective on the right track. Without fear of danger and with no assistance from without, I would like to take up this profession and to show the world the spectacle of a man alone, without resources, with no further support than the strength of his will, with no further clues than he has found out for himself, who can yet run the truth down, and can finally declare one day: 'At this hour, in this place, you shall find the murderers! I tell you that they are there, not because chance has put me on their path, but because they cannot be elsewhere; and they cannot be elsewhere for the simple reason that events brought about *by me* have obliged them to come and fall in the net which I have spread about their feet, each day stronger and closer.'

"I would give up all my time to this hunt;

my days, my nights, for weeks and months. And I should at last know the joy of the man who seeks, and finds. Compared with this, what are the emotions of the gambler? what is the rapture of discovery? I should taste all raptures in a single one. . . . All? Ah! . . . just ONE would be wanting—fear. . . . The fear that multiplies one's powers, that doubles and trebles time. . . . What then? Is there a joy keener than that of pursuit? . . . Yes; the joy of escape.

“Ah, the animal hunted by the hound, escaping towards the ever-receding horizon, beating its head against the low branches, tearing its sides in the thickets—what a history of fear it could tell, if only it were given the faculty of speech! The guilty man who feels himself to be discovered, and thinks at each cross-road to confront retribution, for whom days have no end and the nights are peopled with hideous dreams, and the moments of awakening are moments of fleeting and mad inebriety of freedom—*he* must have felt all this! However faintly tempered the steel of his soul, what swift but powerful joy he must experience

when he has succeeded in setting the cleverness of his pursuers at nought, in starting them on a wrong scent and so obtaining a moment's rest, while they are seeking, exhausting themselves, stopping only a moment and starting again, till their instinct or their judgment set them right. . . . This is truly a struggle! a fight, man to man—a pitiless war, with its dangers and its traps. All the brute instinct of the chase is there; this is the miniature reproduction of the merciless struggle which has thrown living things one against another since the world was, and since the need arose for a daily prey. Does not even the child get his first pleasures from that terrible game? Without knowing it, when he plays hide-and-seek he is learning true ambuscading, the partisan warfare which decimates an army more surely than twenty battles.

“I will experience new sensations and learn more of life. Shall I choose the part of the hunter or that of the game? the part of the policeman, or that of the criminal? A thousand others have become amateur detectives, but none has ever tried the part of the criminal.

*I* choose the latter. Having nothing to reproach me, I shall not experience the real anguish of the guilty man; yet I shall have all the pleasure of the chase. Like a gambler with an empty purse, I shall at least be able to watch upon the face of my partner the emotions of the play. Risking nothing, I can lose nothing; but, on the contrary, I stand to gain all. And if friendly luck makes me to fall under arrest I, being first and foremost a journalist, shall owe to the Police the triumph of the most sensational 'copy' that has ever seen the light—under the title, perhaps, of

“‘THE MEMOIRS OF A MURDERER.’”

“All the doors hitherto closed to my profession shall be opened to me. I shall become acquainted with the trap, the prison-van, and the handcuffs. I shall be able to tell, without fear of contradiction, what prison life is like, how the accused are treated, by what method a judge tries to extort confession. In short, I shall be able to utter, if need be, the most complete and authoritative indictment against

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that formidable array of power which we call the Police and the Magistrature! One inspiration of genius is sufficient for the life of a man: if I do not become famous after this one, I will lose my name in it. Coche, old boy, from this very second you are, in the eyes of the whole world, the murderer of the Boulevard Lannes! The prologue is over, the curtain rises, the play begins. Attention!"



## II

### 29, BOULEVARD LANNES

**O**NESIMUS COCHE cast a searching glance round the room, saw that the curtains were firmly closed, listened to make quite sure that no one was coming to interrupt him, and then, reassured, took off his overcoat, put it on a chair with his hat and stick, and stood still, thinking hard.

It was a question now of building up an entirely new *mise en scène* for the crime of Onesimus Coche, and, for this purpose, the first necessity was to do away with any clues that might set the Police on the track of the real assassins.

After the body, the next thing that attracted attention in this room were the three half-empty glasses on the table. The murderers had committed a serious blunder in forgetting to put them away; their negligence sufficed

to give a valuable clue to the Police. A single man may pass unperceived where three would be arrested. Coche therefore washed the glasses, wiped them, and, seeing an open corner cupboard containing other glasses, put these back in their place. Then he took the unfinished bottle, put out the light so that none of his movements could be seen from outside, pulled the curtains apart, opened the window and the shutters, and hurled the bottle down with all his might. He saw it twist in the air and fall the other side of the avenue. He threw himself back and bit his lips.

“What if somebody heard? if they were to come? if they were to find me here in this room?”

The fear that he felt was in no way comparable to any that he had experienced so far. Swift, coercive, it nailed him to the spot, and caught his breath. In less than a second he felt very hot and then very cold. He searched into the night, he hearkened in the stillness. . . . Nothing. Then he closed the window, pulled the curtains to, came back, groping, to the switch and turned on the electric light.

What a strange thing! Only the darkness made him afraid; the light dispelled all his anguish. That sign alone would have proved him not the real criminal; for the sight of the victim, far from increasing his fear, appeased it. In the darkness, he had gone to the point of almost feeling guilty; when properly lit, his surroundings were no longer horrible in his eyes. He thought that fear and remorse must be appalling things, and that he would have need of a rare gift of self-control to ape their torment without feeling them.

He thought: "I shall have to direct and control myself as much to hide my innocence as a guilty man does to hide his guilt."

He next turned his attention to the dressing-table. There the disorder was too great to be the work of one man.

Inanimate objects bear in themselves the secret of the touch that has handled them. Merely by looking at the position of the towels, one felt that they had been thrown there by various hands: a criminal does not displace so many objects for his own use alone. Instinct, if not reason, obliges him to be quick. Besides,

since in the end every indication must be made to tell against himself, it was necessary that his well-known sense of order should be evident in this room. Such a fastidious being as himself would never have twisted up the towels; some indefinable need for order and neatness remains, even during transitory mental aberration, in people long accustomed by their daily habits to be careful and fastidious. The crime of a man of the world could not be like that of a vagrant; the well-born man leaves his traces anywhere in the tiniest details. Coche thought of the adventure of Ci-devant, who in the reign of terror was sitting at table in an inn amidst murderers and *tricoteuses*, and who was recognised, notwithstanding a most masterly disguise, by the way in which he used his fork. One thinks of everything excepting the small, indispensable details. The forger disguises his handwriting and masks his personality, but a practised eye finds, amid the altered letters and consciously misdirected lines and purposely changed strokes, the characteristic letter, the way of putting a comma that suffices to reveal the disguise.

In his methodical way he tempered the confusion of that room, he washed out the trace of the hand spread out on the hanging of the wall; he scratched out the mark of an iron heel on a drawer; but he was careful not to touch the traces of blood elsewhere. The more they were the longer would the struggle seem to have been. Soon nothing remained of the traces left by "the others." Now, the crime in this faked scenery was anonymous murder, where not the least indication is left to serve the purposes of the law; the next thing to do was to turn it into the crime of a definite individual, to give it a special character—in a word, to "*forget*" in this room some article that might serve as a clue. At this point, perhaps more than ever, it was important to act with prudence and not to let oneself fall into some clumsy mode of trickery, too easy to detect: the article must be one that *could* have been forgotten. . . . Coche took his handkerchief and threw it at the foot of the bed, then suddenly bethought him of something. He picked it up and examined the mark. In a corner was a monogram—M. L. He stopped to consider:

"M. L.—that's not mine." Then he smiled, remembering that handkerchiefs are, as it were, constant objects of exchange, and that one can almost count up the number of one's acquaintances by that of the odd (unmatched) handkerchiefs that lie in one's drawer. . . . His walking-stick?—the Malacca cane with a silver knob, presented to him by a relation from Tonkin, was too noticeable, too personal. . . .

He looked around him and on his own person. He wore no rings; his shirt-studs were of china and made to look like pearl, the kind of studs one finds in any bazaar. Of course, he had sleeve-links, but he was rather fond of them, not for their value, which was very small, but as one is fond of small things worn for a long time, that become almost like friends. Besides, one cannot forget one's cuff-links. You want a violent pull to tear them off. . . .

He clapped his hand to his forehead.

"A pull! Of course! And that's excellent! If the Police find a sleeve-link on the carpet, they will say: 'In the course of the struggle the victim, hanging upon the arm of the assassin, tore the cuff off his shirt and broke the

links; and the murderer, in his mad fury, did not notice it. He escaped without knowing that he left behind him a most valuable piece of circumstantial evidence.'

"It is all quite telling, and quite likely."

Bending his wrist forward as far as he could, he took one side of his cuff and held it, then he seized the other side with his free right hand and gave a sudden jerk. The chain broke and fell on the floor, carrying with it a little gold ball with a turquoise in the centre. The other half link was still in its place; Coche put it in his waistcoat pocket; and in his haste to do this he did not notice that his fingers were bleeding, that he was staining his shirt and his white waistcoat. From the inside pocket of his coat he took out an envelope with his name and tore it up in unequal pieces. The writing on one piece was—

	"Monsieur On	
	22	R
On the other—	esi	
		ue de
On the third one—		E. V.
On the fourth—	mus Co	che
		Douai."

As the last one showed his name too clearly he made it into a little ball and swallowed it. He bit off the first two letters of his name written on the first fragment, and so left three small pieces, almost impossible to decipher, but capable, however, when properly joined, of giving the name of the supposed murderer. Without giving too many trumps to his adversaries, he would play in good style to the end, and would give them a fair chance. He threw down the three little bits of paper. One fell on the table, almost in the very middle, the other two stuck into the carpet. To make sure that they should not be confused with the letters belonging to the victim he picked up the other scattered papers and put them in a drawer, which he shut. Then he cast a glance round the room, to make certain that he was not forgetting anything; he put on his overcoat, laid two of the soiled towels over the face of the dead man, whose eyes, now glassy and, as it were, flattened, had lost their clearness; put out the light, and then left the room, going with long strides down the corridor and the stairs, and on into the garden.



In crossing the path he was careful to do away with all trace of the footprints, already dimmed by the wind. He spread some yellow sand over them and, walking carefully, with one foot on the sand and the other on the hardened earth of the grass border, he reached the gate, opened it, closed it behind him, and was at last on the pavement outside. Motionless shadows stood arrayed on either side of the road. The great, impenetrable soft night had no sound and no scent. Away in the far-off distance a dog began to howl at the moon. And suddenly the silence was filled with an infinite sadness. Coche remembered an old servant who used to say to him when she heard the lonely howling of a dog in the country:

“That is to tell St. Peter that the soul of a dead man is about to knock at the gate of Paradise.”

Strange magic of old memories! Eternal childhood of man! He shuddered, remembering the time when, quite a tiny boy, he used to hide his head under the bed-clothes, not to hear the great, mysterious moaning that at night seemed to spread among the plants; and he

felt again for a moment the sweetness of his mother's kiss, which had so often rested on his forehead.

Then all was still. He looked at his watch. It said one o'clock. Once more he looked at the house where he had spent that memorable half-hour; then he went back to the gate, poked aside with his walking-stick the ivy that covered the number, and read "29."

He repeated twice over: "2, 9. 2, 9." He added up the numbers by way of finding a *memoria technica* to remember them by, saying again to himself: "9 and 2—11." He cast about in his memory for some well-known date that might coincide with this number, and, remembering that he was born on the twenty-ninth day of the month, he was sure he would not make a mistake or forget, and he went off. He reached the end of the boulevard without meeting any one. He was, in fact, walking straight on without looking around him, too unnerved to think freely, trying now to classify his memories. They were growing confused, mixed up to such a point that he could no longer see quite clearly what was now his

course of conduct. He was to become, as it were, a double personality. His life would, in any case, have to be very different from what it had been an hour before. One act of hesitation, one false manoeuvre, might destroy his plan. Quite innocent, and only incriminated through his own will, yet he could only allow himself the mistakes of a criminal.

Not far from the Trocadéro he came across a couple walking slowly in the opposite direction to his own. When they had passed he turned round, and as he watched them disappearing in the darkness he thought:

“There go two people who have no idea that a horrible crime has been committed a few steps away from here; except the murderers, I am the only living man who knows.”

He felt a kind of pride in being the only holder of such a secret. For how long would he keep it? When would the murder be discovered? If the victim, as by all indications seemed likely, lived alone and had no attendants of any kind, several days might elapse before his absence was noticed. Some day a tradesman would ring at the door; receiving no

answer, he would insist, would go in. A frightful odour would assail him; he would climb the wooden staircase, penetrate into the room, and there . . .

Then would come the mad flight and shrieks: "Help! Murder!" The Police would be set afoot; the whole Press would be bent upon discovering the murderer; the public would go half mad on this now celebrated case, which would, as usual, send up the sale of newspapers in one day;—for the mysterious circumstances attending this crime could not fail to give it unusual importance. During the whole time he—Coche—would continue his own life, attending to his ordinary avocations, carrying his secret with him from place to place, with the joy of the miser who keeps in his pocket, and fingers at each step, the key of the strong-box where he stores his goods. Man is never so clearly conscious of his moral strength and of his individual value as when he is even a partial depositary of some mystery which surrounds him. But what a heavy responsibility a secret is! How it weighs on a man! What

a temptation it must be, at every moment, to cry:

“None of you know anything; *I* know.”

More than once, in the daytime, Coche would cross the Boulevard Lannes and would give himself the satisfaction of watching the people pass before the house of the murder, and of raising his eyes and saying to himself:

“Behind those closed shutters there is a murdered man.”

And he thought: “I need only speak one word, and I could rouse in a flash the curiosity of all these people coming and going so indifferently around me now. . . . I shall not speak that word. I am going to trust myself to chance. It was by chance that I came out of my friend’s house at the very moment necessary for finding out these things: chance shall settle upon the exact moment when the tragedy is discovered.”

Thus wrapped in thought, he arrived before a café; through the filmy glass he could see men playing cards and the cashier, a woman, dozing at her post. A cat curled up before the stove was also asleep. A waiter, standing

behind one of the gamblers, looked on; another, in a corner, was turning over an illustrated paper.

The wind blew very strongly. From the little bourgeois café came a warm, cosy breath. Coche, who was shuddering a little with fatigue, emotion and cold, went in and sat down. He experienced a gentle and pleasant sensation of warmth. In the close air, clouded by the smoke of the pipes, there was a smell of cooking and coffee and absinthe, brought out by the heat; and this smell, which he usually loathed, seemed to him altogether pleasant at this moment. He ordered coffee with brandy; he rubbed his hands, picked up an evening paper absent-mindedly from the corner of his table, then suddenly put it down, and, getting to his feet, said, almost aloud, though he didn't know it:

“Good Lord! . . .”

One of the card-players turned round. The waiter, who had moved and now stood before the counter, thinking that Coche had called him, hastened back.

“Yes, sir?”

Coche waved his hand.

"All right. Nothing. . . . Have you a telephone here?"

"Yes, sir. First door on the right; straight down the corridor."

"Thank you."

He passed between two tables, crossed the corridor, shut the door behind him, and rang up the Exchange. He grew impatient at the delay of the attendant. At last they answered. He took down the receiver and began:

"Hullo! 115-92 or 96."

He listened to the calls from one clerk to the other. He heard the bells, that seemed to strike against his ears as drum-sticks might on too taut a skin. At last the voice said:

"Hullo! Yes?"

Coche disguised his voice.

"Are you 115-92?"

"Yes, sir."

"The *World*? I want to speak to the sub-editor."

Another voice came to the telephone, calling for a number.

"Hullo, hullo, hullo!"

"Excuse me, sir. The line is engaged. . . .  
Hullo! The *World*? Yes! I want to speak  
to the sub-editor."

"He can't come, sir; he is in the compositors'  
room; he can't be disturbed."

"It's a very urgent matter."

"Very well, sir. Who shall I say?"

"By Jove!" thought Coche, "I hadn't  
thought of that." But he had no hesitation.

"The editor-in-chief, Monsieur Chenard."

"Very good, sir. . . . I will take your mes-  
sage. Please hold the line."

The confused sounds of the newspaper office  
came to his ear over the telephone in a rumbling  
medley. A constant humming, the sound of  
crumpled paper; all the light murmurs that  
Coche knew so well, having heard them for  
ten years every night at the same hour when  
his work was over and he made ready to go  
home.

"Monsieur Chenard?" said the voice of the  
sub-editor, a little out of breath.

"No, sir," replied Coche, still changing his  
voice; "forgive me, I am not the director of  
your paper. I used his name to make sure



that you would come, for I have something to tell you which is most important and most urgent."

"Who are you, then?"

"If I were to say that my name is Smith or Jones, that would add nothing to what I have to say, sir, and it would be nothing but a waste of very precious time."

"I think the joke's gone far enough. . . ."

"For Heaven's sake, sir, don't cut me off! I am the bearer of a sensational piece of news that no paper will have either to-morrow or after to-morrow unless I give it. First of all, one word: is the paper in the press?"

"Not yet; but it will be in ten minutes. You see I have no time. . . ."

"You must find time to take out something from the stop-press news and put in this, just as I dictate it:

" 'A horrible crime has been committed at No. 29, Boulevard Lannes, in a house inhabited by an old man of about sixty. Death was caused by a tremendous gash which reaches from the ear to the breast-bone. The motive of the crime appears to be theft.' "

"One moment; repeat the address."

"29, Boulevard Lannes."

"I thank you. But . . . how can I tell . . . ? What have I to prove . . . ? How on earth do you know? I can't prove such a startling piece of news with no proof. . . . There is no time for me to verify it. . . . Tell me something by which I may know how you came to hear. . . . Hullo, hullo! don't go. . . . Come back, sir."

"Well," said Coche, "you may think, if you choose, that I who speak to you *am* the murderer! . . . But I can tell you this: I shall buy the first number of the *World* that comes out this morning, and if I don't find in it the announcement that I have just given to you I shall pass on my information to the *Telegraph*, your rival; and, after that, you can settle it with Monsieur Chenard. Believe me, you'd better cut out a few words and put in my own. . . ."

"One word, sir. How long have you known . . . ?"

Coche gently put back the receiver, went out of the box and back into the room, and sat down to sip his coffee at leisure, like a well-

satisfied man. Then, having paid with a bank-note—the only bank-note he possessed, and one which he kept in his pocketbook from the 1st of January to the 31st of December of each year, for appearances' sake—he turned up his coat collar and went out. And as he walked out of the room he halted a minute, saying convincingly to himself:

“Coche, old boy, you're a genius.”

### III

## THE LAST MORNING OF ONESIMUS COCHE, REPORTER

**F**OR more than five minutes the sub-editor of the *World* shouted and swore and stamped his feet.

“Hullo, hullo—Damn it! Answer, won’t you? Oh, the idiots, they’ve cut us off! Hullo, hullo!”

He put back the receiver and began to ring up the Exchange furiously.

“Hullo! I say! You cut me off.”

“No, sir. They must have rung off at the other end.”

“Then it was a mistake. Put me on again, please.”

After a minute a different voice asked:

“Hullo, hullo! What do you want?”

“Did you telephone a moment ago?”

"We did telephone, sir, but I don't know whether it was to you. . . ."

"Would you mind telling me whom I am speaking to?"

"Café Paul, Place du Trocadéro."

"Right. Please tell the gentleman that I want to speak to him again."

"Sorry, sir, the gentleman has just gone."

"Send some one after him. Run!"

"Impossible, sir. We're just closing up, and the gentleman must be quite far by now."

"Could you tell me what he was like? Do you know him? Is he one of your customers?"

"No, sir; it's the first time he's been here. As for what he's like, sir: he looks about thirty; dark, with a short moustache. . . . I think he was in evening dress . . . but I didn't notice."

"Thank you; I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"Not at all. Good evening, sir."

"Good evening."

The sub-editor was perplexed. Had he better publish the news, or should he wait till next day? If the thing was true, it would be most annoying to let another paper forestall

his. But supposing it were not true? . . . This important matter must be settled at once.

He thought deeply, then gave a slight shrug, took out some lines detailing the insults that members of opposing parties had publicly hurled at one another in the Croatian Diet, and inserted the following:

**"HORRIBLE TRAGEDY!"**

"We are informed that a murder has been committed at No. 29, Boulevard Lannes, in a house inhabited by an old man. The unfortunate victim was found dead with a deep slash across his throat. Our representative is investigating the case.

**"Stop-press news, unverified."**

A few seconds later the paper was being printed off as fast as possible, and by 3 a.m. three hundred thousand copies, containing the news of the murder of the Boulevard Lannes, were on their way to the different depots. By a quarter to five half the Paris edition was out. The sub-editor, who had not left the office, looked at his watch and sent for a messenger.

"Go to Mr. Onesimus Coche, 16, Rue de Douai, and tell him to come here immediately. He is wanted on urgent business."

"That's the way," thought he, "to prevent that incorrigible man from hawking the news all over the place. If it's not true, my note frees me from all reproach; and if it *is* true, no other paper has the lead. Ah! if Coche only had more ballast, I should tell him the whole thing at once; but who can trust a youth who, in all good faith and with the best intentions, would have the story all over Paris? a charming creature, but so very erratic and unreliable. And this night, of all others, he chooses not to come to the office! The moment one really needs him he can't be found. Well! well!"

Then, perfectly satisfied with himself, he lit his pipe and rubbed his hands, thinking: "Yes, old boy, you're an amazingly clever chap."

. . . . .

Onesimus Coche had just fallen asleep when the messenger from the *World* rang at his door. He woke up with a start, and listened for a minute, thinking it might be a dream;

but he heard the bell ring again, so he sat up and called out:

“Who is there?”

“Jules, from the *World*.”

“One moment. I’m coming.”

He lit his candle, threw his dressing-gown over his shoulders, and opened the door, saying rather crossly:

“What on earth do you want? What’s the matter now?”

“Monsieur Avyot says, will you come at once.”

“He wants to take a rise out of me, does Monsieur Avyot! It isn’t five o’clock yet.”

“Beg pardon, sir; it’s five-twenty.”

“Five-twenty! A pretty time to haul people out of bed. You can tell Monsieur Avyot that I am not at home. . . . Good night, Jules.”

And he pushed him gently towards the door.

“Well, sir, I don’t mind, sir; only, I—I think it is quite important, sir, about that business. . . .”

“What business?”

Jules pulled out a copy of the day’s paper, still wet, and smudged in several places. He



opened it at the third page and pointed to the paragraph about the murder in the Boulevard Lannes at the bottom of the stop-press news. While Coche read over these lines the boy added:

"It came by telephone just as we were going to press. Unless it's a hoax, the mate who sent us this has earned twenty-five francs in one night."

"Twenty-five francs? . . ."

"You don't believe we're the only paper he has given that news to? I expect he made the same little speech to all the morning papers, and presently he will turn up at the office for his pay. I did that about the Charity Bazaar fire; I happened to be there just when it broke out . . . only, it was for the evening papers, and there are only just two that pay you at all. . . ."

"Just so, just so," said Coche, handing back the paper. "You're quite a wag, Jules! . . ."

But to himself he thought:

"The idiot!"

Then he added:

"Yes, that's probably it; you tell Monsieur

## ONESIMUS COCHE, REPORTER 67

Avyot that I'm coming. Just a minute, to put on my clothes. . . ."

Once he was left alone, Coche began to laugh. It really was rather funny that they should come and tell this piece of news to *him*! For the first moment, he had felt a real surprise. Two or three hours of heavy sleep had made him forget the events of the night; he had really wondered what they were calling him for, and had only understood when Jules spread out his paper. Surely enough, all was going excellently well. He had been rather afraid that somebody else might be given this job, and *that* would have complicated matters. Now the game was in his hands.

So thinking, he got dressed. It was cold in his room without a fire, so he put on a flannel shirt and thick clothes and a motor coat over that. Last thing before leaving the room, he felt in his pockets and saw that he had keys, pocketbook, notebook, and stylo. He had forgotten nothing. When he passed before the porter's lodge, and said he wanted the door opened, a sleepy voice answered, grumbling from the other side of the glass partition:

"How many more times to-night?"

A cab was walking slowly past. Coche hailed it, gave the address of the *World*, and went on with his own thoughts.

The only possible attitude to take up at the office was one of absolute ignorance. Even to feign reluctance and incredulity might serve to divert suspicion from himself, and to allow the sub-editor the satisfaction of having used his judgment rightly against all appearances. Coche was too well acquainted with human nature in general, and with newspaper men in particular, not to be aware of the fact that if one wants to reach a given aim one must share with others, to a certain extent, the success of the enterprise. Avyot would get all the more excited over this business if he could say to every one: "I have a very keen scent; no one wanted to follow me. Coche thought some one had got a rise out of me. But I stuck to it; I knew I was not being duped; I'm not to be caught so easily; I'm an old bird."

The cab stopped. Coche paid his fare and went up quickly to the office. The sub-editor

was waiting for him, pacing up and down his room. When he saw him he cried:

"There you are at last; we've been hunting for you since one o'clock. I don't know where you go to spend your time, but, of course, that's your business; only you certainly might consent to present yourself at the office. One never knows where to find you."

"At home," said Coche, in a most natural manner. "I dine in town, and by one o'clock this morning I was tucked up in bed. I left the office at half-past seven last night; everything seemed perfectly calm. What's the matter now?"

"Just this: about two o'clock this morning I was told that a crime had been committed in the Boulevard Lannes."

"All right; I'll jump into a taxi and go straight to the district police-station."

The sub-editor put his hand on Coche's shoulder. "One moment; they will be very hard put to it to give you any information, for, my dear fellow, they know nothing about it."

"I don't understand," said Coche. "The

police know nothing about it, and *you* have the news? How did you get it?"

"Look," said Avyot, showing the paper to him.

Coche read his own stop-press news for the second time, and appeared to give it the greatest attention.

"Upon my word," he murmured, when he had done reading; "that looks a tricky thing. Are you sure it's not a hoax?"

"If I were absolutely sure," answered the sub-editor, "I would not have put in: 'Unverified'; yet"—and he put on a meaning expression—"I have good, excellent reasons for believing it to be true."

"Would it be indiscreet to inquire . . .?"

"Indiscreet?—no . . . but, to say the least, it would be quite useless. In point of fact, the requirements of the case are simple enough, and can be put into a few words: first of all we must verify the information. Then, being the first and only paper informed, we must take advantage of our twenty-four hours' start to push on our inquiry simultaneously with the Police. I think the man who informed me

won't stop here, and I shall probably see him shortly . . . if only to claim the money due to him."

"Do you think so?" said Coche.

"I believe so," affirmed the sub-editor.

"Well," murmured Coche.

"My dear sir, you will grant me a certain amount of experience in a profession which I have followed for twenty years?"

"Simple soul," thought Coche, "how surprised you would be if you knew the name of the informer! You may brag now, but your voice was not so authoritative last night when you begged me. . . . No, your informer is not coming to ask for money. The louis which you would give him does not satisfy all his ambitions; your experience counts for very little beside his cunning."

And he added, aloud:

"Certainly . . . and yet it is quite true that this is a very strange business, and I wonder where to begin."

"That's your own look-out. First of all make sure that the information is accurate, and then simply see that you give me four

hundred lines with photographs for this evening. If you carry this business through properly, you shall have a rise of fifty francs a month in your salary."

"I am very much obliged to you," said the reporter.

And to himself he thought:

"If I carry the thing through, what *I* call carrying through, it will not be a question of fifty francs, my dear man; any one who wants Onesimus Coche will have to bid high; I will do things on a grand scale, à l'Américaine!"

Outside, the blue of the sky was slightly filmy; a faint glimmer of daylight blended its white reflection with the light of the lamp. Now that the printing-room engines had stopped, the sound of their rhythmic hum was exchanged for the confused noise of the street, pierced from time to time by the horn of a motor. A private omnibus passed by, with a racket of wheels and windows. Onesimus Coche stood up, took a copy of the *World* and put it in his pocket.

"Boulevard Lannes," he said; "number . . ."

"Twenty-nine. Don't be absent-minded now; it really is not the right moment."

"Oh," said Coche, protesting, "you may feel safe on *that* score. It is seven o'clock; I'll start at once."

"And I'll be off to bed. I have deserved my sleep. *I* was at work while you slept soundly."

Coché turned his head to hide the little flame in his eyes and the smile which played about his lips; and he went out. On the staircase he met Jules, who asked:

"Was I right, sir?"

"Quite right."

He took a cab and said to the driver:

"Avenue Henri-Martin, to the corner of Boulevard Lannes."

A kind of reserve, an unaccountable scruple, prevented him from giving the exact address. Without being aware of it, he was acting like a criminal, not daring to stop his cab before the house. But he fancied that on hearing the address, 29, Boulevard Lannes, the cabman would be sure to look at him with astonishment. On the pavement, along the still shuttered shops,



there was a swift passing of busy people. To Onesimus it seemed that the slowly fading night, which still enveloped all things in a cold, sad mist, had been exceptionally long. He sat back in a corner of his cab, and closed his eyes. The vision of the café, where he had decided upon his future plans, mingled with the thought of what those plans might lead to. The glimmer of early dawn, through his half-closed eyes, brought to his mind the dismal light that surrounds the scaffold at the hour of an execution, and the faces of the two men and their accomplice; then the bloodless face of the murdered man, and, above all, the red, enormous outspread hand which he had washed out on the wall, passed in a monotonous succession again and again through the maze of his thoughts.

It was broad daylight when the cab stopped. Onesimus Coche walked slowly down the Boulevard Lannes; one by one the houses seemed to be waking. Still sleepy faces appeared suddenly here and there between green shutters, which opened with a click against the wall. Scarcely any one was about. A grocer's

cart stood before one door; a butcher's boy, with his tray under his arm, walked by, whistling gaily; a postman was just ringing at the gate of a little house. Coche looked at the number and read 17. The boulevard was so different in the daylight from what it had been at night, that he had arrived quite close to the house of the crime without being aware of it.

The day promised to be cold but fine. The sun rose slowly over the horizon, behind small, pink clouds, and cast a yellow springtime light over the white soil and on the walls covered with ivy. There was nothing left of the shadows of the night, and for a moment, so great was the contrast in the appearance of the road, the whole adventure seemed a nightmare. It was past eight o'clock; the *World* had been on sale for some time already, and no one seemed to have the slightest inkling of the tragedy. A policeman who was coming up towards the avenue was reading the very paper in question on the page where the news was printed. Coche thought: "Either I have dreamt the whole business or he will see and stop."

But the policeman went on.

"Come, come," said Coche to himself. "I am not mad. Of course it's real. I *did* walk down here last night; I *did* go in a garden and see a man lying murdered across his bed. I . . ."

He put his hand to his forehead and felt a sharp pain near his temple. He looked at his hand: there was a drop of blood on it.

Then all that had seemed vague and dim grew clear; he remembered his fall on entering the room and the bruise on his forehead. He raised his eyes and saw that he had reached No. 29.

All was perfectly still. The mark of his left foot showed plainly on the yellow sand, and that of the other foot still more clearly on the edge of the flower-bed, although a little film of frost had formed since then. He had not thought of that detail, but was glad of it, as of a mark of favour from Fate, and he began to pace up and down before the house. Workmen passing by looked at him searchingly—at least, so it seemed to him. It was no good prolonging this watch, at the risk of attracting attention.

Would it not be smarter for him, from the point of view of a journalist, to go to the Police Commissioner and lay the paper before him?

At that moment two cabs drew up and stopped a few yards away. He saw several men alight, and he recognized among them the Commissioner of Police. Four police officers followed on their bicycles; they leaned their machines against the little wall exactly at the place where, a few hours before, he had pulled the ivy aside to see the number.

The Commissioner hesitated a moment before the door. He pulled the bell and waited.

Then Coche, whom the Commissioner had already noticed, came forward and said, with his most winning smile:

"I don't think any one will open, sir. The house is empty, or at least empty enough to prevent any one answering your call."

"Who are you, sir? I don't want anything of you; kindly leave me."

"True," said Coche, bowing; "I should first have introduced myself. Pray forgive my

omission: Onesimus Coche, from the *World*; here is my card. . . .”

“Ah! that’s another matter,” replied the Commissioner, returning his bow, “and I am delighted to meet you; your paper has inserted, in the stop-press news, a piece of information which has greatly surprised me; I fear the editor must have accepted the news very lightly.”

“I scarcely think so, sir. We take great care to use all necessary precaution. If the *World* has published the information of which you speak, it is doubtless true. We have a circulation of eight hundred thousand copies; we are not the sort of paper for hoaxes or catch-penny headlines.”

“I know, and yet I wonder what investigation you can possibly have made, considering that the hour of the crime and the crime itself are as yet hypothetical, and also that I myself have heard nothing about it.”

“The Press has at its disposal many and various means of investigation. . . .”

“Hm! hm!” murmured the Commissioner, sceptically, and he rang again.

"Meanwhile," went on Coche, "do you not think it rather odd that nobody answers?"

"Not in the least; it is probably a mere coincidence. The house may not even be occupied."

"But it *is* occupied."

"How do you know it?"

"You must allow me, sir, to plead professional secrecy; I shall be delighted to help you in your investigations, but do not ask me more than I can tell."

"For the sake of clearness, just tell me, have you any real certainty?"

"Something of the kind. Our correspondent was certainly well informed."

"His name?"

"Come, sir; you are asking me to give away one of our men. . . . You would not do the same for one of your own! . . ."

The Commissioner looked Coche straight in the eyes.

"What if I *made* you speak?"

"Short of putting me to the rack—and even then—I don't see by what means you could oblige me to speak if I do not wish to. But

I'm too anxious to remain on good terms with you, sir, to grow venomous upon this point, and I prefer to tell you that our correspondent is entirely unknown to me. I don't know his name, or his age, or his sex, or anything about him . . . nothing . . . except the tone of sincerity in his voice, the exactness of his information, and the authority with which he spoke. . . ."

"I tell you again, sir—seeing that the Police knew nothing about it, the only people who could have spoken are the murderer and his victim. Now the victim, according to you, is dead . . . it must therefore be the assassin who . . ."

"Did I say anything to the contrary?"

"Upon my word, he would be the most extraordinary murderer I have ever heard of. During my whole career—a pretty long one already—I have come across some unaccountable types, but never one like this. Indeed, if he is a friend of yours, Monsieur Coche, you must introduce him."

"The difficulty is," murmured Coche, with a little fixed smile, "that he does not share your desire. And let me add that 'he' means, as *I*

say it, not the criminal, but my informer. If I were quite sure that he was the murderer, my respect for the law would oblige me to hide nothing from you. But I am rather inclined to think that he is an amateur detective—a clever one, it is true; one of the sort that work for the pleasure of it, for glory's sake."

At this moment one of the policemen came up to the Commissioner.

"There is no entrance the other side. The house is built up against a big building which isn't occupied now, and this is the only door."

"Then we will go in," said the Commissioner. "Is the locksmith there? . . . Ah! I see he's not needed. It seems that we can push the door open."

"Have you any objection to my accompanying you?" said Coche.

"Objection is scarcely the word. I naturally prefer to be alone for the first investigation. However legitimate may be the desire of the public to know all the facts, the law requires privacy at present."

Coché made a bow of assent.

"And I do not think," went on the Com-



missioner, "that I am slighting your paper. Your well-informed correspondent knows already, no doubt, as much as I shall know by the time I leave this house. Indeed, if I happened to think it to the interest of the inquiry to withhold some detail, he could easily provide you with it. . . ."

Coche bit his lips and thought to himself:

"You're making a mistake with your irony, my dear fellow. We shall have it out some day."

One thing was always quite unbearable to him: he could not stand being made fun of. And although he was quite sure—and had cause to be—that he would be the one to score in the end, it irritated him to be quizzed just now.

He watched the Commissioner, his secretary, and a police-inspector entering the house. He shrugged his shoulders and remained on guard before the door to make quite sure that if *he* could not go in, no newspaper colleague should, either. Attracted by the presence of the Police and by the unusual coming and going about the house, several passers-by had stopped

before it; they were now gathering in small groups, asking one another what had happened. One man explained the matter after his own invention: it was a matter concerning politics, and the Police were searching the house; another, one who had read the *World*, gave the true reason: there had been a murder. He added details, telling the exact time, and hinting at the low motive of the crime. The crowd was already beginning to blame the Police for its slowness of action. Instead of sending their agents to watch the house, would it not be much better to send them in all directions and search in the known thieves' dens?—What was there so surprising, after all, in the daring of this crime? There was never a policeman to be seen in dangerous places. Who was there about in the streets after midnight? Only cut-throats, and you had to pay heavier rates each year, and were *not* protected, after all. The policemen about the place, quite impassive, listened to these accusations. Coche, for the first few moments, was amused at them. But soon he ceased from listening. An eager curiosity took hold upon him. In his own mind

he followed the Commissioner; he seemed to see him enter the corridor, climb the stairs, hesitate on the landing to decide which door he should enter first—unless, indeed, some traces of blood, that had escaped him, Coche, in the darkness, pointed the way. For one second he was really upset: if the murderers had left any sign on the staircase, his whole *mise en scène* became useless. But this fear was soon dispelled. If that were the case, the Commissioner would already have entered the room, and Coche could hear his voice. No. Up there, in the darkness of the curtained room, they were only groping their way. The window in the corridor, opening on the boulevard, was covered by a thick blind; he had pulled it down himself in the night to make sure of not being interrupted.

While he elaborated all this there came back to him the stale mustiness of that room all covered with blood, the acrid smell of the glasses half-filled with red wine. . . . He saw again the large black hole in the broken mirror, and the blood-curdling sight of the body lying across the bed . . . the horrible dilated eyes. . . .

He had never gone through moments of such violent emotion; his mind had never worked so fast as now. He looked at the four windows, wondering:

“Which is the bedroom window? Which one will open first?”

Suddenly there was a stir in the crowd—a rather large crowd by now—and then a great silence, amid which was clearly heard the clicking of shutters against the wall. A head appeared between the two uprights of the half-opened window and then disappeared quickly, and the window was shut again.

Coché looked at his watch. It was three minutes past nine.

The law was now finding out a part of what he had known since the middle of the night. He had a start of exactly eight hours. He must now be careful not to lose his start; but he must first of all learn what was the first impression gathered by the Commissioner.

This first impression—which is generally a wrong one—is of considerable importance to the proceedings. A bad detective goes off blindly after the first clue, and aims, above all,

at being quick; but the true bloodhound goes on slowly, without ever losing his self-control, quite sure that no time is lost which is put to a judicious use, and that the most logical reasoning is worth less than the tiniest real clue, while the latter can always be found if one knows how to look.

The crowd had rapidly grown so large that the Police had found it necessary to clear the immediate surroundings of the house. There remained on the cleared space only Coche and a few other newspaper reporters who had turned up in a great hurry and were now talking excitedly. The correspondent of an evening paper—a fiery Southerner who spoke very loud—was quite angry at not having any exact information. He absolutely *must* have his report ready for twelve o'clock, and it was now nearly ten. Coche, whose paper had been the first and only one to give the news, was badgered with questions; but his usual freedom of speech had given way to an obstinate reserve.

He knew nothing; he was waiting just like the others; if he had had the slightest knowledge of the details he would have been most

pleased to share it with his brethren. Is not this the usual course among reporters, and is it not the best means for giving full and trustworthy information? Every one gleans what he can; even if one is the "special correspondent" of a newspaper, one shares the job with the others, and one's telegram is only the more or less well-written summary of what every one knows. That's the best way all round, for, after all, no man can be in ten places at once. If each were obliged to collect the facts without any assistance, he would need very large sums of money, and unusual and sometimes unobtainable means of conveyance; whilst with three or four working together one shares expenses and results. Over and above this general information, one tries to give one's article a personal character, and to pretend that one has said something new, by inventing a little and elaborating. If a correction has to be inserted next day, one puts it in because the law requires that much; but one carefully adds to it a little note to the effect that, with all due respect to the right of one's opponent, one

still desires to uphold the statement made the day before.

And Coche, as he parried his colleagues' questions and affirmed that he knew nothing, reminded them of ten or twenty occasions on which, as a good comrade, he had not kept for himself information obtained either by chance or through his own cleverness.

The Southern correspondent agreed, but was on pins and needles; the others could afford to be calm, confound them; they had their whole afternoon and evening for running after news, but he was run very close for time.

He could not understand that at this moment even the High Commissioner might possibly have any more serious preoccupation than this—his own personal need to know.

Time went by, and still no one came out of the house. One of the reporters suggested that it was thirsty weather, and that they might as well go and wait in a café; but in this horrid place, where could they find one?

"There's one five minutes away," said a man in the crowd; "at the end of the boulevard you

go through the Avenue Henri-Martin, and there's a café in the Place du Trocadéro."

"Good!" said the Southerner; "are you coming, Coche?"

"Oh, I can't; at least, I can't just now; but you go. If I hear anything I'll let you know."

"All right. Are you others coming?"

Coché watched his colleagues walk off, and was glad to be left alone.

Since they had arrived he felt all the weight of his secret; he had been twenty times on the point of letting out a word or of making an allusion. It had cost him a tremendous effort to keep it all from that man of the South, knowing as he did that the poor devil was reckoning upon his evening article at four centimes the line to pay something on account to the restaurant where he took his meals. But why should he, out of vain pity or unnecessary sensitiveness, spoil his whole sport, take the freshness off his information, run the risk of losing a game that had begun so well for him? . . . Later on he would make it up to him. For the time being, this business was *his* business.

Little by little he began to feel conscious of



the flatness of waiting. He was torn between the secret joy of knowing that the Police were about to make fools of themselves and the curiosity of learning the details of their present experiences. Now and then he listened to the chattering of the crowd, trying to catch some word that would reveal the name of the victim, his habits, his manner of life; for he was in this curious position, that he knew better than any one else one part of the truth—the thrilling, the horrible part—but he was absolutely and entirely ignorant of things which the first comer could find out at any time—even the name of the murdered man.

From what snatches of conversation he could overhear he learnt nothing except that none there present was any better off than himself.

Some neighbours told how the old man went out very seldom, just to do his shopping; that sometimes in the summer, quite late at night, he would walk a little in his garden, but always alone; that no one ever came to see him; that he did all his housework himself, and led an uneventful and mysterious life, the secret of

which had often been sought for, but always in vain.

Towards midday, the Commissioner, accompanied by his secretary and by the inspector, came out. The three men stopped in the garden, looked at the windows, walked up to the wall, talking all the while with great animation, and then came towards the gate. Just as they reached it, Coche moved a step forward.

"Well, sir?" said he.

"Your information is quite correct. . . ."

"Now that you have made the first inspection alone, would it be possible for me to go in, were it only for a moment?"

"There would be absolutely no advantage in the proceeding, I assure you. I should like nothing better than to help you in your task, and if you wish to come back with me to my office, I will tell you on the way what I have seen, all that I can of it. I will add that I have already made up my mind, and that affairs will proceed successfully. . . ."

"Did you find any clues or traces of any one? . . ."

"Monsieur Coche, you must not put too

many questions. . . . And during this time, what have *you* been doing?"

"I have been thinking, and . . . listening and . . . looking about me. . . ."

"Is that all?"

"It's about all."

"You see that if I didn't tell you anything you would be rather hard put to it to make up your article for to-morrow? But don't be afraid; I will tell you more than you need for a two-column article."

"Well, Monsieur le Commissaire, I will not be behind you in generosity. During the three hours that I have spent here I have, as I said a moment ago, thought and listened and looked. My thoughts, I must confess, have not led me very far; my listening has brought me no valuable information. But my sight . . . oh, my sight! . . . you have no idea how sharp the sense of sight becomes when it is working alone. What gets in our way most of the time, what paralyses the effort of our various senses is always that one hinders the other; I have always thought that it is, if not impossible, at least very difficult, to be clearly conscious—in

shooting, for instance—of the sound of the shot, of the cloud of smoke and the smell of the powder and the little pressure on one's shoulder. But if I succeeded in concentrating on any single one of my senses—that of hearing, for instance—I could analyse the sound quite perfectly. In that apparently simple yet violent noise I could distinguish almost the firing of each tiny grain of powder, the quiver that the flying ball sends through the leaves—and I would hear it echo the very second that it sounded in the woods. . . . Now, a few moments ago, feeling quite sure that I should hear nothing, that no sound would reach me from the interior of the house, that the clatter of the loafers around had no more importance than old women's gossip, tired of trying to analyse a mystery, the key of which was doubtless in your hands, I looked . . .”

The Commissioner, who for a moment had listened rather absent-mindedly, opened his lips and began:

“But . . .”

Coché did not give him time to finish the

question, and went on as if he had not been interrupted:

“I looked—oh, I looked intently, passionately, as a man *must* look who has only the sense of sight to go by; I looked as a deaf man looks or as a blind man listens: my whole intellect, my whole will to understand went into my eyes; and my eyes, working alone without the help of any other senses, saw something to which you have not paid the slightest attention; a thing which may be of no interest or may be of foremost importance, a thing which one must look at to-day, for it will no doubt have disappeared to-morrow or this evening or in an hour’s time. . . .”

“And this thing . . .?”

“If you turn round you will see it, not as well as *I* can, for it melted away an hour ago, but sufficiently, nevertheless, I am sure, to feel sorry that you paid no attention to it at first. This thing is a footprint left upon the ground, that little spot outlined on the grass, a little darker in the white frost; the sun has spoilt it a little. A short while ago it was remarkably clear.”

"Let's go back," said the Commissioner quickly.

This time Coche followed him. When he put his foot on the sand of the path he felt a strange sensation of pride and fear. Automatically he looked closely at his own footprint. The long, narrow outline did not look in any way like that which his big American shoes had just printed on the sand. For his workaday shoes he had chosen the square, broad-welted pattern, but in the evening he wore very fine shoes, being rather proud of his shapely, well-arched foot.

The Commissioner bent over, and looked intently at this mark. The sun, by now high on the horizon, had broken through the grey clouds. A few moist sunbeams gilded here and there the thin layer of frost; one of these beams fell straight upon the footprint.

"A measure; a pencil, quickly!" said the Commissioner, putting out his hand without turning round.

"Here's a pencil, sir," said the secretary; "but I haven't got a measure."

"Send for one quickly. Monsieur Coche,

have you got a camera? Will you be kind enough to take a snapshot of this footmark?"

"Certainly. But the photograph would only give a likeness, a simple and very small likeness, without the landmarks that you can find on the spot. Snapshots of things resting on the ground are never very satisfactory; to show the position of an article you must use special and very complicated apparatus; indeed, I am afraid it is too late now; the sun is melting the whole thing . . . my footprint . . ."

He hesitated imperceptibly as he said those two words—*my* footprint—and he corrected himself quickly:

". . . the footprint that I noticed is becoming less and less definite . . . the outline is shading off, disappearing. . . . In a minute there will be nothing left of it. . . . You see, one can scarcely make out the heel . . . the sole of the foot is melting . . . growing smaller—there! What a pity you did not come out a few minutes earlier."

At the bottom of his heart he was really and greatly relieved. For a few minutes it had seemed to him—it was a mere trick of

his imagination—that the three men had looked at him askance, as if they had divined that there were, under his thick shoes, small, narrow feet, capable of leaving, on the white morning frost, that impress which the sun had cancelled in one minute. His aim was, indeed, to get himself suspected and even arrested. But the nearer he was to reaching it, the more anxious he became, in spite of himself, to make it more difficult of achievement.

The Law of the Land was beginning to seem to him something formidable and strong, like some animal with a hundred arms, unwilling ever to let go its prey. And also, of course, he realised that it was entirely to his advantage that he should be able to take his own time, and to choose the exact moment when he wished to be arrested. He wanted to learn, and to be able to judge of, all the wheels-within-wheels of Police action, and for this purpose he must follow its moves, almost command its advance, slacken or hasten it, as he pleased. So that, when the Commissioner, trying to hide his vexation, murmured, "After all, perhaps this impress was one of our own. My secretary was



on my left, and may quite well have trodden on the border"; when the Commissioner said this, Coche did not demur to his explanation, even though he did not altogether assent to it.

It was quite a good thing that there *should* remain a little uncertainty in the mind of this magistrate. Coche felt that the Commissioner, in uttering those words, was hiding some part of his thoughts; and that, without wanting openly to attach much value to this trace of a foot, he could not fail to go by it to some extent in directing his investigations. He therefore said, though somewhat unconcernedly:

"As far as I am aware, no one trod on this border; while you crossed the garden, I was following you with my eyes, and I think I should have noticed. . . . The only thing that I am sure of is that this impress was perfectly clear when I first saw it. But, again, this does not mean that it was there before your entrance into the garden. . . . The best thing, in any case, will be not to speak of it."

These last words reassured the Commissioner. It would have been highly distasteful

to him to be shown up as less observant than a newspaper correspondent. This mistake might hinder his promotion; so, understanding that Coche had guessed his thoughts and forestalled his desire, he said to him, almost with friendliness:

“Come into my carriage; I shall have time to give you a few hints.”

“I would far rather,” said Coche, aware that he now had a certain advantage, “go into the room of the crime with you, were it only for a minute. The information you kindly promise to give me will no doubt be most valuable; but if any of my colleagues comes in an hour’s time to your office, you cannot keep from him what you have told me. Whilst, you see, here I am the only reporter present—the others were tired of waiting, and have gone off; so that if you grant my wish you can quite easily say to the others, who might complain of your partiality to myself, ‘You should have been there, too.’ . . .

“Besides, the words of an eye-witness acquire enormous importance for the reader. Even if I see the body for no more than a

second, I can give a much more realistic description——”

“Well, if you wish for it so much, come with me; we will only go in and out again; but you shall see with your own eyes.”

“I ask no more than that.”

The four men went back into the house. The passage that Coche had explored during the night, groping through the darkness, now seemed to him very wide; he had imagined it narrow, with bare walls, and the grey stone in them showing clearly. It was quite different.

The pavement was of red tiles; the wall, painted light green, was adorned with old prints, arms, and valuable old knick-knacks; and the staircase, which he could have sworn was of old worm-eaten wood, was, on the contrary, made of pitch-pine, and varnished. Everything in this house was clean and bright.

When he got to the top of the stairs he felt more familiar with the landing; and of his own accord he stopped before the right door. He was sorry he had done so, and asked himself:

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"If I were in the Commissioner's place, should I have noticed this?"

But he had no time to spend in speculation. The door was thrown open. He took a step forward and then stopped, very much affected.

This room where he had spent such terrible moments, seemed to him doubly terrible now. For an instant he regretted his whole plan of the night before and the curiosity that had made him insist on returning to this spot. Mechanically, without daring to look around him, he took off his hat.

Strange thing! He, who in this very room had meddled with the scattered papers, moved the blood-stained clothes, even touched the body itself, in the dead of night, and at a moment when he thought that he was risking his very life at every gesture or sound, now started and felt again in the depth of his heart the indefinable, inexplicable, and masterful fear which had first assailed him on the lonely boulevard near the quarters of the Army Police.

"Be very careful," said the Commissioner; "don't move or touch anything . . . not even that piece of glass there at your feet. . . ."

Nothing must be overlooked in a case like this. . . . There . . . there, you see . . . that's a bit of a cuff-link . . . it probably has no importance whatever . . . but one can never tell. . . ."

Coche's mind was of the type that reacts naturally against unpleasant sensations. By dint of talking humbug when other people were depressed, he had learnt to humbug himself, and the Commissioner's naïve remark filled him with joy. That cuff-link was an unimportant thing, was it? . . . Then he thought to himself:

"What if this man is a genius among detectives? what if he has actually been clever enough to distinguish, among all this untidiness, between the true indices and the faked ones? What if he is now reading quite clearly into my mind, and ironically enjoying after his own fashion my efforts to fib decently?"

The Commissioner went on:

"There is every sign of a short but desperate struggle. . . . The table, you see, is displaced; that chair is broken; the mirror split from top to bottom; the body is thrown back across the bed. . . . Look at it: you will never see a

more terrifying expression on a murdered man's face. The whole scene is depicted there in those tortured features. I can divine it by the drawn lips and the convulsed eyes; I can read it on those hands clutching the sheets. . . . It is perfectly harrowing. You have never seen anything quite like that, I am sure!"

"Yes," murmured Coche, as if speaking to himself. "One day I did see a murdered man . . . one murdered scarcely an hour before, perhaps half an hour only. His body was not quite cold yet; he still gathered in his eyes, as it were, a memory of life; he was stretched like that, in a pool of blood; his wound was almost identical with this one . . . and yet there was something, I know not what, still more sinister in the man I remember. . . . I can look at this one without fear, as I might gaze upon a face moulded in wax. . . . This is a dead body, that's all. . . . This room is like many other rooms . . . whilst, looking at the other one . . . the other murdered man whom I saw once . . . I felt as if there still were horror around his head, between his lips, before his eyes; the house—a peaceful and happy house like this

one—reeked with murder, smelt of blood, of living, hot, smoking blood, such as runs on the floor of a slaughter-house. . . . To-morrow, in a week's time, I shall have forgotten the man I see now . . . but the other one . . . I still see him before me, and I *know* that the memory will never fade. . . .”

Coche spoke in short, dry tones, yet strongly, clenching his hands, both tormented by a real horror and elated by the dangerous joy of feeling on the brink of a precipice and of thinking:

“At this moment the words that I speak hold no real meaning except for myself; no one can penetrate within the impassable barrier of my external self, to my mind, where the whole truth lies treasured! I hold that truth between my hands, like a captive bird. I half open my fingers, I feel the wings fluttering between my palms. The bird is ready to escape; then I tighten my grip; I hold the panting thing, I master it. . . . I need only speak a word . . . make one gesture, at this moment. . . . No! I will *not* speak that word, I will *not* make that gesture. . . .”

"That is strange. . . . I should have thought . . ." said the Commissioner, . . . "I, who yet am used to these spectacles, must confess that I am unusually stirred by this one.—Was it in Paris, that body?"

"Oh, no, in the country, a long time ago—about ten years ago," faltered Coche.

And, realising that there was a ring of falsehood in his words, he added, to diminish a little the effect of his description:

"I was on my first campaign, reporting for a local paper down south, near Lyons. . . . The crime was a commonplace murder, and created no sensation in the country at large. . . . I remember the Paris papers never spoke of it at all."

This time he was quite clear that all three of his companions were staring at him; and he was so suddenly and violently disconcerted that he had to take a step back and lean against the wall to steady himself.

"I think," said the Commissioner, "you have seen enough of this for your article. But, my dear fellow, you, who can nurse such



memories, should be steadier than this. . . .

You're as white as a sheet. . . ."

"Yes, I'm . . . I'm sure—I expect I am very pale. . . . I suddenly felt giddy . . . it's nothing."

"Let us go," said the Commissioner, leading the way. And in an undertone he said to his secretary:

"They're all the same sort, these blessed journalists; they can always go one better in words; but when they are put to the test . . ."

Coche did not hear, but seeing the Commissioner whisper and look at him sideways, he felt sure that he had betrayed himself by his clumsy speech and his insistence to give details that no one wanted. And he thought:

"Surely I am not found out already! *I am* a perfect fool!"

As he crossed the room, he threw a glance at the mirror. He saw his face reflected there in exactly the same spot as the night before; but he was paler now, with blue marks under his eyes; and he thought that a more sinister, convulsive smile had settled on his lips, and that this must be the kind of face that you see

on a criminal about to be dragged to the gallows.

He closed his eyes to escape that sight and went out of the room shuddering within himself, with joints all stiffened and his teeth chattering.

He did not regain his composure until he was in the street; there, the fresh breeze blowing upon his face dispersed the horrible vision. He smiled at his own fear, and, seated in the cab, he exclaimed:

"Upon my word, I seem to have lost all my pluck! I apologise, sir; I have behaved disgracefully. . . ."

"Oh, one can't help it when one is new to these things. . . ."

The cab growled along, swaying with the uneven step of the old nag that pulled it. The lights and shadows, after that momentary touch of the wintry sun, were now beginning to fade. The clouds fell lower, casting a dismal veil over the world. Soon the snow, first fine as dust, and then in heavy, close flakes, began to fall over the great silence of the deserted boulevard.

The two men were silent, wrapped in thought.

Coche made a little clear patch in the film which covered the cab window, and watched the passing houses in the street and the flakes of snow. He wished he knew what the Commissioner was thinking about, what he had seen, what explanation of the whole thing he was working out for himself; but, out of excessive caution, he hesitated to break the silence. At last, realising that this might seem unnatural, he asked:

"Well, sir; what do you think of this business? Do you take it to be a common case of burglary and thieves' murder, or do you think it must have deeper causes?"

"I may as well tell you, perhaps, that theft seems to me entirely out of the question as a motive for this crime. I don't mean, of course, that no articles or money or valuables have disappeared; on the contrary, I am sure that knick-knacks and money *have* been taken; . . . but only by way of a blind."

"You mean . . .?"

"I mean that the murderer has tried to create

an artificial *mise en scène* in order to put the Police on a false scent."

"By Jove!" thought Coche; "have I hit upon a Sherlock Holmes in the flesh? If that's the case, luck's against me!"

And, aloud, he said:

"Not really! That would be interesting indeed! I must confess that nothing that *I* perceived gave me the slightest inkling of it. If you put it like that, the problem becomes singularly complicated."

"For a superficial mind, it does. As for me, I have worked for three-and-twenty years in the most varied surroundings, unravelling the most ingeniously-laid plots, and this is not, after all, so peculiar. If I were to tell my impression in a few words, I should state the case like this:

" 'Some one—a man—exceedingly well acquainted with the habits of this old gentleman—came into the house, possessed himself of papers which he either needed or wished to destroy. . . . ' "

"Oh," exclaimed Coche, extremely interested; "simply papers! Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. I found several hundred letters jumbled up in a drawer, and I could swear that they had not been left like that by their owner. The murderer alone can have thrown them back in such disorder, and he must have had some reason to look them through. Whether he found what he wanted will no doubt be discovered in the course of the investigation. But it seems to me quite certain that he carried away the table silver—there are traces of that—and a sum of money—we found an empty purse behind the bed—simply for the purpose of deceiving the Police. I should not be surprised if some jewellery had been taken—for the same reason. There's that bit of cuff-link which I showed you. In an hour's time all the Paris jewellers, and by to-morrow all the jewellers in France, will know of it, and be requested to give what information they can about the make and the sale of it. It most likely belonged to the victim, but we shall soon find out about that. . . . And to crown all—and the argument is no less valuable because it is almost entirely of a psychological nature—the order that reigned

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amid all the confusion, and a certain desire for cleanliness, visible amid the horror of the massacre, cause me to assert that the crime was committed by a person belonging to a perfectly respectable class of society; not only that, but this person must be endowed with a wonderful mental balance and extraordinary self-possession; and he acted alone. I will add . . . but no: I have already gone too far. . . .”

Coché had listened breathlessly to the Commissioner. The uneasiness which he had felt at the start gave place to the most profound satisfaction; the plot, so suddenly invented and so carefully laid by himself, would not fail; he was sure of it now. More than that, his *mise en scène* had suggested ideas to the Police undreamt of by himself. The Commissioner seemed really to be accumulating difficulties to his heart's content, and neglecting real clues in order to exploit to the utmost the real complications of the case. The simplest things acquired, in his eyes, the importance of serious events. Once started on a false scent, he brought the most diverse indications into line

with his scheme. Having rejected from the first the hypothesis of common burglary ending in murder—the only true hypothesis, and, in any case, the most plausible—he interpreted all he knew according to the requirements of his own private theory. He ran unhesitatingly, head down, into the trap which he—Coche—had laid for him. When the Commissioner had said, “The murderer has tried to create an artificial *mise en scène*,” Coche had thought that this official, gifted with a rare power of insight, had had some glimmer of the truth; but no, in reality he was but hiding the truth in a thicker cloud, fencing it off by a more impassable barrier. Thus, not only was Coche’s stratagem entirely unsuspected, but, by an extraordinary inversion of facts, everything that had seemed to the reporter to form the nucleus of a presumption against himself was thought absolutely insignificant by those in charge of the preliminary investigations. The situation was so grotesque that Coche desired to hear it stated again and quite unmistakably.

“Then I take you to mean that this singular murderer, this criminal genius, wished to give

out his crime as that of some common burglar; that he tried—unsuccessfully—to ‘create’ disorder; that he did not steal as an ordinary burglar would; but, working alone, yet tried to give the impression that he had accomplices?”

“Exactly so.”

The cab stopped at the door of the Commissioner’s office. Coche got down first, and began stamping on the pavement to stretch his legs. He was perfectly delighted; the whole thing was going far better than he had dared to hope. In a few hours he had collected more information and had heard more mistakes than he needed for his first *two* articles. He thanked the Commissioner, and said to him, in quite a natural tone of voice:

“All you have told me is most convincing. Thank you. Pray let me know if I can be of use to you in any way. . . .”

“I daresay . . . if occasion offers. . . .”

“One word more—you don’t intend to mention that footprint in your report?”

“Well, no. . . . I really scarcely saw it. . . .”

“Right, quite right. Then I won’t speak



of it either. Good day, sir, and thank you, again."

"At your service. I hope to see you again shortly."

"Thank you."

"And now," thought Coche to himself, "we'll see who gets the best of it!"

## IV

### FIRST NIGHT OF ONESIMUS COCHE, THE MURDERER

**C**OACHE entered the café of the Place du Trocadéro just as his Southern colleague was heard to call in stentorian tones for "la Générale," and, ever disdainful of ineffectual action, was also sweeping the cards off the table with one broad gesture, saying to his companions:

"You don't really want to play, do you?"

In taking a cup to pass it to his right-hand neighbour, the impetuous youth caught sight of Coche, and said:

"Any news?"

"Quite sensational," answered Coche, sitting down on a form. "Get some ink and paper and write at once; it will take just a minute; you can cook it up afterwards as you like."

I've had a long talk with the Commissioner, and he has given me all the information I wanted—except . . . there! I *am* a fool! I forgot to ask him the victim's name!"

"That's no odds—his name was Forget, he lived on his small income, and had had this house three years. For any more details of that sort, we can call by and by at the police-station."

"Good! Well, now . . ."

And Coche began to dictate his conversation with the Commissioner, laying great stress upon the smallest details, reproducing the very tone of each speaker, and mentioning all possible hypotheses. But he took good care not to mention his visit into the house or the trace of steps outside, or the flaws which he had noticed in the Commissioner's reasoning; all that was his very own; and, besides, no one could have got any good out of it; it was of no value to people who did not know the real truth of the thing.

While dictating, Coche let his eyes roam round the room; and in a minute he noticed that he was in the café from which he had

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telephoned the night before. By some curious trick of chance he had sat down at the very same place where he had sat then. At first he tried to turn his head away from the waiters, so as not to be recognised, but then he told himself that, after all, it would need a great deal of ingenuity to draw any conclusions from the fact that a customer of one night came back next morning. No one was paying the slightest attention to him; the woman who had been at the desk the night before was now engaged in putting the sugar on the tables, the waiters were laying the cloths, and the owner, seated by the stove, calmly read the newspaper.

Coché finished his story, and then answered most amiably to a number of supplementary questions, feeling doubly pleased that he could save his colleagues a lot of trouble in writing up their articles and that he could keep for himself the benefit of the more sensational news.

Presently they dispersed. Some got into cabs; the Southerner hastened towards the "tube" station; and Coché went off on foot,

saying that he had something to see to close by, and delighted to be alone at last, free to think, and to act without the constant pre-occupation of being watched.

He lunched at a fifth-rate restaurant, glanced at the day's papers, and then came back to the Boulevard Lannes as far as the fortifications—still on foot, suddenly conscious that he needed some physical exertion to combat the unnerving effects of solitude and a vague, unaccountable sensation of fear, which began to possess him. It irritated him to think that the real murderers—those whom nobody was attempting to pursue—felt perhaps much happier than himself at this moment. He walked in the middle of the road, threading his way through small, slippery alleys round the barracks, and examining closely the faces of men and women as they passed by. And suddenly he felt drawn towards all these tattered and sinister-looking human beings by a kind of tender commiseration—the brotherly indulgence that is born in the hearts of men conscious of sharing in their nature both joys and guilt.

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Coché was not, himself, quite clear about his present position. He felt a different man from the Coche of the day before. He had already adapted himself so completely to his moral "make-up," and had so deliberately made up his mind to attract suspicion, that he almost felt as if he were guilty indeed.

And, after all, was there *no* guilt on his soul? Were it not for him—who knows?—Justice might be already on the trail of the assassins. . . . And what if he were to speak?

Up there, in the lurid chamber of the murder, he had been that morning on the point of telling all about his chance encounter and his mysterious visit; then, thinking of all the loss that this meant to him, he had held his tongue. Now he felt the oppression of some heavy and growing weight. Had he not in some way connived with the murderers? One day—who knows, to-morrow perhaps?—he would have to account for all this before the Law. . . . Yet, even so, what a triumph for a journalist! and what a sensational inquiry! What scathing pages he could write! This man was so built that the only crime he realised to be

wicked was a crime against a human being: a crime against institutions, or against laws—which he conceived as, after all, nothing but an orderly enumeration of prejudices—left him perfectly indifferent. If he *were* to be condemned to a few days' imprisonment for having hoaxed the Police, he would not thereby fall in his own estimation, and there would still be time to tell all that he had seen and that he knew; with no danger to himself, for, after all, he was not in the least responsible for the death of the poor old man, and by the time he had entered the room the whole thing was over. There remained the question of public justice. . . . But who knows whether, through delaying for this once the information he had, he could not give to the public mind one of the invaluable lessons that make men more cautious, and the law more wise, and the law's executors more intelligent?

When it was quite dark he made up his mind to go home. As soon as he appeared the porter told him that they had been for him twice from the *World*, and that somebody else, who had refused to leave his name, had asked to see

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him. Coche asked for a description of this latter visitor, but when it was given him he could remember nobody with whom the description would tally. At any other time he would have simply thought: Well, he'll come back again.—This time he *said* it, but went on obstinately thinking about the occurrence. As it was seven o'clock he did not even go up to his room, but made straight for the office.

There he was being impatiently expected. As soon as he appeared, the sub-editor broke out with a storm of questions and reproof.

For the last twenty-four hours his behaviour had been really most extraordinary; he had become impossible to find; he must be run after, forsooth, all over the town. The day before, when the first news of this business had reached the office, he was not to be found; to-day his article was feverishly expected, and he had disappeared since eight o'clock in the morning. His conduct meant that the next day's edition of the *World* would have to appear without his sensational report. By this time all the other papers knew as much as his own, if not more. The evening papers were already printing



well-informed articles of two columns on the crime of the Boulevard Lannes.

And the sub-editor brandished the Southern reporter's newspaper before Coche's eyes.

"In here there's an interview with the Commissioner of Police. Don't you come and tell me that there was no means of getting information. This was written at eleven o'clock at the latest. By eleven o'clock *you* knew nothing at all! . . . What are you after?—I'll telephone to that reporter, and entrust this business to him."

Coche stood quite still while the man was storming; at last he spoke:

"Excuse me, you said that this article was written by eleven?"

"Just so; half-past at the very latest. . . ."

"This article was written at the very earliest at half-past twelve or a quarter to one."

"Well, half an hour makes no difference."

"Excuse me, a great difference in this case. . . ."

"How do you know exactly what time that reporter wrote his article?"

"Because I dictated it to him . . . as, in-

deed, I dictated it to three other colleagues on the morning papers."

"Upon my word! this beats anything I have ever heard! Then it was *you* who had the interview with the Commissioner, and just for fun, just to play the part of the fairy god-mother, you pass it on? By to-morrow the whole Press will be in possession of what should have been exclusively our own. You beat me hollow!"

"Alas, sir, the whole Press will not be in possession of it, and I am sorry for that. Only four papers will, and those are not among the most important. . . ."

"Look here, Coche, this won't do. You are not quite yourself to-day. I cannot rely upon such a very whimsical collaborator on so serious a matter as the present, and when we really need untiring exertion. I don't want to know whether it is true that you have had an interview and have scattered the fruit of it broadcast. . . . I took my own steps four hours ago: you may call at the cashier's, and you shall be given a quarter in advance. We will dispense with your services. . . ."

"I am perfectly delighted, sir. I was just about to tell you that I desire to be free again: you release me without my demanding it, and add a quarter's salary; I could scarcely have wished for so much. . . . I am not well, to tell the truth. I am tired and unstrung. I must have rest and solitude. . . . Later on, when I have recovered, I will call on you again. . . . For the time being, I want to go away. . . . I don't know exactly where, but Paris air does not suit me. . . ."

"A very sudden resolve," sniffed the sub-editor. "Yesterday you were perfectly well; to-day you're too run down to continue your work. . . ." Then, suddenly changing his tone: "My word of a moment ago is not final . . . you must not be too touchy, and parry my thrust by pretending that you intended to leave us in any case. . . . Let us forget our whole conversation, and go quickly to your office and write up your article. . . . I know you well enough to feel sure that you have something to tell . . . that you are as well informed as any one, if not better. . . . Come along, my boy; that's settled."

But Coche shook his head.

"No, no; I am leaving; I must leave . . . I really must."

"Are you by any chance off to join the staff of another paper?—leaving us just at the moment when we have embarked on this very sensational inquiry? If you wanted a rise in your salary you should have said so."

"Monsieur Avyot, I want no rise; and I am not going on the staff of any other paper. I simply wish to return, either for a time or forever—events alone can settle which—to a state of individual freedom. . . ."

And he added, in an unsteady voice:

"I give you my word of honour that I will do nothing that can in any way damage or hinder your paper, and that you must not interpret my departure as a trick of any kind. Let us part friends, eh? . . . Oh, and another thing; I want absolute rest and absolute isolation, and to live away from all Parisian life, out of reach of the inquisitiveness of acquaintances and the solicitude of friends. But as I should not like my disappearance to look like flight, will you kindly keep any letters directed

to me here in your private room, instead of leaving them in my pigeon-hole? People might be surprised to see that I give no directions for having them forwarded. . . . I can see to them all on my return."

"Won't you go back on your word?"

"I cannot."

"I don't want to know where you're going, but will you tell me when?"

"This very evening."

"And when do you think you'll be back?"

Coche waved his hand vaguely, and said:

"I don't know. . . ."

Then he shook hands with the sub-editor and went out.

He at last felt free, in the street, amid the passers-by, threading his way between the cabs and walking fast. He drew a deep breath.

With a few minutes' thought he had settled his whole plan of campaign. He had arrived at the office too preoccupied to think clearly. Since the previous day events had succeeded one another with such swiftness that he had not had time to arrange definitely in his mind what attitude he wished to adopt. His aim

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was to puzzle, if not to mislead, the Police; he wanted to draw their attention upon himself, without apparent effort, and to keep himself rather conspicuously before their mind's eye, giving them so much to do that they would end by watching almost exclusively himself, by seeing in him the probable culprit, and at last by arresting him.

Now, he could not achieve this result unless he were perfectly free, held by no duties and able to wander according to his will, modifying his life and his habits as he chose, and owing no duties to any one. On the staff of the *World* he could not publish all he knew over his own signature. And even if he *had* published it, his words would have carried no more weight than attaches to those of an ordinary journalist. Indeed, what logic was there in a man making himself the historian of the murder of which he wanted to be the accused?

Moreover, these special circumstances could not last forever. Once on the wrong scent, it was quite likely that the Police would grow obstinate, and then, finding nothing to confirm their preconceived ideas, they would end

by shelving the whole business. In that case, unless it came to his making an anonymous and precise declaration, he—Coche—would be left peacefully alone! This he would not have at any price.

He hesitated on the rather difficult question whether he would or would not return home, and he decided in the negative. He was well provided with money, for he had just received his quarter's salary—a matter of a thousand francs—from the *World*: it was more than he needed to keep him for a few weeks. He would, besides, not have occasion to spend much on himself. His needs would be confined to a bedroom in some obscure corner of the town, and to meals in modest restaurants; as for his travelling expenses, they would naturally be reduced to the minimum. On that score, then, he was perfectly safe. As for the advantages of his plan, the moment that he fell under suspicion, his sudden departure would be sure to look like flight, and the conclusions that could not fail to be drawn from the coincidence between his flight and the discovery of the murder would lend considerable weight

to any other point of circumstantial evidence that might be proved against him.

About ten o'clock he began to consider the choice of a resting-place for the night. For a moment he thought of Montmartre. It would be perfectly easy to escape attention in that quarter, where all was living and astir, amid the holiday-makers and variety artists and the *demi-monde* who walk about there day and night; but from Place Blanche to Place Clichy, from Place Saint-Georges to the Rue Caulaincourt, he risked meeting a friend at every step.

La Villette and Belleville offered the shelter of their restless population; but the Police raids were too frequent there, and, also, without being a coward, he yet preferred a quarter where the knife was less freely handled.

Then he remembered the time when, a barely-fledged young journalist, he had wanted to live the life of the Quartier Latin, amid those students whom he had pictured to himself like the heroes of Murger. In those times he had a small room high up in the Rue Gay-Lussac, with no furniture but an iron bedstead, a table which served him both for dress-



ing and writing, and his own large wooden trunk.

He would not be sorry to live again for a few days in that corner of the gay capital, where, on his first appearance, when he first marched to the conquest of Paris, he had spent his days of youthful enthusiasm and dreams. And, moreover, in that quarter or in its neighbourhood he would be both near enough to the heart of the city to know all that was happening there, and far enough to escape being found.

The Boulevard Saint-Michel, filled with light and with gaiety, amused him. He went into a café near the Luxembourg and ate sandwiches, just to allay his hunger. Then he looked through the evening papers.

The *Temps*, even the stately *Temps*, gave up nearly two hundred lines in a centre column to the murder of the Boulevard Lannes. Properly considered, this was but a commonplace crime; every day something of the sort was discovered in Paris, and except in summer, during the slack season, when the papers, having no news, trade for all they are worth on the

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slightest event, such matters as this are given only a few lines in some obscure corner of the page, under a modest heading—and that's all.

Now, by some strange caprice of Fate, this murder of the Boulevard Lannes had been a sensational thing from the start. One would almost have thought that some extraordinary instinct had warned people of something unforeseen and unusual about it; and, by an even stranger coincidence, events had followed one another in a manner so favourable to Coche's desire that he would never have dared to hope for such a measure of success. Now he would soon be able, unseen and yet present, to follow these events, to affect them, and almost lead them at his pleasure.

He read most attentively the articles relating to *his* interview with the Commissioner, and he smiled as he recognised his own wording, the reflections he had made, and the questions he had put.

"To-morrow," said he, "I start the campaign in good earnest."

Having finished his meal, he went out, walked up Rue Saint-Jacques and took a room

in a hotel. His window looked out on the street, and he could see the yard of the Val-de-Grâce with its beautiful chapel and imposing approach.

He remained for a few moments pressing his forehead against the window-pane, assailed by a thousand memories of former times, almost regretting his daring and regretting the monotonous quiet which he had enjoyed now for months. He remembered having had the same sensation one day just before he began to deliver a lecture which he had not prepared. As he sat down before the little table with its green cloth, he had said to himself that day as he did now:

“What a foolish idea it was, to launch out upon this! What need was there, O Onesimus, to give yourself these pangs? At this time you might be peacefully seated at home, instead of standing before the public and defying the critics. . . .”

But he soon spurned the weakening thought.

He let the curtain drop, left the window, and sat down near the fire, in the dancing lights and shadows which it cast. Then, stretching

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out his feet, soothed by the warmth of the fire and the pleasantness of his surroundings, free, quite unknown, as he now was in this quarter of Paris where he had formerly lived, he began to think, no longer in dreams, but clearly, with calmness and with order. He went over the last twenty-four hours, re-read the notes he had taken so hastily, tore up the papers that he had in his pockets, and threw them on to the fire. After which he undressed and got into bed; and, as he felt himself gently sinking into sleep, he thought to himself:

“Who will sleep better to-night, I wonder? The guilty, with no reason to fear the Police for the moment, or the innocent man, who desires a cause for fear?”

## V

### A FEW POINTS OF DETAIL

**W**HEN Coche woke up next day it was already late and a grey wintry morning. He dressed quickly, anxious to read the papers. As he passed the porter's office on his way out the man called to him:

"Excuse me, sir, there's just the little formality of the Police Register . . ."

At the mere word "Police" Coche started. He replied, nevertheless, putting on as natural a look as he could:

"What about it?"

"We are obliged to keep a record of the name, profession and date of entry of our visitors. Generally, the precaution is quite unnecessary, especially in such a good hotel as ours; but one can never tell, with all these crimes and murders. . . . Look at the murder of the Boulevard Lannes!"

Coche felt himself grow deadly pale. He looked keenly at the man, and opened his lips to put a question—almost to protest. But the man was looking down, rummaging in his desk; and when he raised his head soon after and gave Coche the register, open at the right page, his smiling countenance immediately reassured our friend. The man pointed with his finger at a line where the date was already filled in.

“Here, sir; you need only give your name, your profession, and say where you come from.”

And while Coche was writing he added, following up his train of thought of a moment before:

“Here, on the left bank of the river, it’s not so much against ordinary criminals that we have to protect ourselves, as against *political* criminals, Russian refugees, and nihilists. We’re overrun with them. It isn’t pleasant to give lodging to people who travel about with bombs, and may blow up your house at any moment.”

“I should think not,” said Coche, giving him back his pen.

And he thought to himself:

"If, with this babbling fool about, I am not tracked within forty-eight hours, it means that the devil is against me."

He was going out, when the man stopped him.

"When you come back to-night you need only ring three times. Your key will be hanging up under your pigeon-hole."

"Thank you," said Coche.

Without knowing why, Coche remained for a few minutes on the doorstep, looking up and down the road, with the curious uncertainty of action of one who does not know what to do, but wishes to appear intent on business.

The man, sitting down again at his table, looked at the register and read:

*"Farcy, no profession, from Versailles."*

He looked up, examined the outline of the new-comer, and murmured:

"Hm! You no more live on income than I do, my good man; I'm a good judge of *that*. . . ."

But when Coche, considerably more nervous since the events of the day before, turned

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round, feeling the porter's eye upon him, the latter smiled in the most engaging manner, inwardly reflecting that, after all, it was no business of his, provided that Coche paid his bill all right.

One thought brought another in its train. This visitor had come without any luggage; there was therefore no guarantee of his return. The man called after him:

"Monsieur Farcy! . . . Monsieur Farcy! . . ."

As *Monsieur Farcy* did not come, he ran as far as the door, and called again:

"Monsieur Farcy! Sir!"

Coche had heard the first call perfectly well, but had not paid any attention to it. The name of Farcy, adopted by him haphazard a moment ago, was so perfectly unmeaning to him that he only remembered it was *his* name when he heard it called persistently. He felt decidedly uncomfortable since he had left his room, and especially since the hotel porter had mentioned the murder of the Boulevard Lannes, though evidently he had done so with no special intent.



He turned round, therefore, somewhat out of patience:

“What is it, now?”

“Sir, I’d forgotten to say that it is customary to pay at least your first week’s lodging in advance.”

“All right,” said Coche; and, coming back, he paid the sum required of him, although he had quite decided not to return that evening. He would give the Police another indication, if not of his guilt, at least of his desire to remain unknown.

At the same time, and by some strange contradiction, he experienced a sensation of discomfort stronger even than he had felt the day before. He had only been wearing his mask for a few hours, and he was already oppressed by it. Things began to feel unreal; the great, automatic machinery of Justice seemed dimly to be set in motion around him; with his mind’s eye he saw its action, uncertain at first, and then brutally relentless. He was like a bird which sees some gigantic net falling upon it slowly from a great height and tightening its meshes every minute—a bird capable of under-

standing that this net must inevitably imprison it in the end.

Yet he desired this result at the same time that he feared it. And now he reflected that, except for that terrible first scene in the night, he had done nothing to affect matters yet, and that time was passing; he must act, and not, having once deliberately entered upon this road, leave everything to chance. Although he knew that blunders are often made by the Police, he had not come to the point of believing them so inevitable that at this juncture he need only sit down and wait. His departure from the staff of the *World* might give rise to vague suspicion against him. He must now try to give such suspicion a definite shape.

He walked about for a while, reading the day's papers; all were full of idle or even imaginary information concerning "*the Murder.*" Some hinted already that the Police were on a track of discovery. He smiled. On the *World* he had been replaced by a man named Béjut, who had no experience except as Parliamentary reporter. Yet the man gave his information with a tone of great authority.

Could he have already been to interview the Commissioner on his own account? That would be useful for Coche, who wanted the Police to know that he had left the staff of the *World*.

When he had finished reading, Coche carefully folded up his papers and put them in his overcoat pocket.

"So," thought he, "one need only displace two or three bits of furniture and alter a *mise en scène*, even in the clumsy way that *I* did, for all these people to run off at a tangent. So the Police, who are paid to be cunning, can be caught by the first trap one sets on their path! In spite of all the things that should have carried real weight as evidence—the disappearance of the silver, for instance, and even the position of the body, which indicated unmistakably that the crime was committed by two men at least—*these* people have only seen one thing: my broken bit of a cuff-link! And on that they have built up a whole imaginary romance! There does not seem to be on the public Press a single man capable of unraveling the arbitrary and absurd tangle of police deduction. My game is almost *too* easy."

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And then he began to wonder what the real culprits were doing at that moment. They had, no doubt, found a receiver of stolen goods to whom they had sold theirs; then they had left their hovel, and were wandering among low inns and public-houses.

At this point it suddenly occurred to him that intoxication is a great revealer of secrets. Besides, the scum of society constantly speak of their crimes, for they take a pride in them. "Unless I hurry up," thought Coche, "who knows whether the indiscretion of those men will not give them away and turn my whole plan into thin smoke. I haven't a minute to lose."

He lunched early and hurriedly, and about one o'clock found himself in the street. Till four there was nothing to be done. Newspaper offices are practically closed in the afternoon; nothing happens there. Avyot always arrived at the office of the *World* about five o'clock. Till then Coche must simply kill time.

No daylight hours had ever seemed to him so long.

He went into a café, ordered a drink which he did not take, went out again, wandered about aimlessly. . . . At last people began to light their shop-lamps. Twilight came on, and then darkness. . . .

He was in the quarter of the Military College; there, at least, he was sure not to meet any one he knew. Since he had reached it he felt as if he were in another town.

He heard five o'clock strike. From this moment he must regulate and co-ordinate all his actions with the single aim of bringing about his own arrest. He could, of course, give himself up to the Police; but he would not dream of that. He wanted to show up their red-tapeism—their contemptible shortsightedness; and for that purpose it was important that they should arrest him on their own initiative. Then he could point out afterwards how lightly they rush upon any track, with what unthinking tenacity they follow it up, and, above all, how obstinately they cling to it, flying in the face of any amount of evidence. The apogee of his triumph would be reached when he could give the correct version of the

crime, and probably see, even then, how all his indications would be neglected!

He went to a public telephone and rang up the *World*. Then he changed his voice again as he had done in the little café of the Place du Trocadéro, and asked to speak to the sub-editor on urgent business. He did not give Avyot the time to question him, but began:

"Sir, I am your informer of the other night; it was I who told you of the crime of the Boulevard Lannes; you have had occasion to see that I was correctly informed, and I now desire to add some details."

"Thank you. But may I know to whom \_\_\_\_\_"

"To whom you are speaking? There's no advantage whatever in that. My information is good, and I give it to you for nothing; what more could you wish? You shall hear nothing about myself till I have fresh orders. Of course, if that does not suit you, my information can be bestowed elsewhere. . . ."

"No, no!" protested Avyot. "I am listening."

"Very well; then take it from me that the

Police are on a false scent, and that nothing is true that has been published the last two days. There is no dark and mysterious motive behind the crime; it was simply an ordinary murder, the motive of which—the *only* motive—was theft. As for the surmises of the Commissioner of Police, they're very wide of the mark indeed. If you want to find out the truth, continue your own investigations, and be particularly careful to tell your man that he must not believe everything he is told."

"Once more, sir . . ."

"I may have a serious reason for revealing to you things which I alone know. . . . Advise the Police to abandon their present tack; assert and uphold, in spite of every appearance to the contrary and every possible correction, that the culprits . . ."

"You said——?"

"*The culprits*: quite so. Ask in your article whether the Police are sure that there were no footprints in the garden. Now, I have told you enough for to-day. Some time I will communicate with you again. I will give you fresh details according as events shape them-

selves. . . . One word more: make no mention of your mysterious correspondent. Whereupon, dear sir, I have the honour——”

Coche replaced the receiver and walked to the door.

. . . . .

When the Police Commissioner read the next day's article in the *World* he began merely by smiling at it; but as he reached the last lines he frowned, and then threw down the paper angrily.

Notwithstanding his promise, the reporter *had* mentioned the footprints. The allusion was very indefinite as yet, but he could tell that this was only a first hint, and that next day details would be given. He had treated Coche almost as a friend, for the sake of his promise; he had let him see what no other reporter had seen; and this is what he got for it! It was not sufficient that the *World* should have published the first news of this thing before he himself knew anything about it, but that paper must, even now, be putting weapons into the hands of those who are always ready to disparage the Police!



True, only very slight importance could be attached to this article, which was full of absurdities; true, he himself felt sure that he was on the eve of discovery, and that in the end he would be proved right. But was it not strange, indeed, that the paper in favour of which he had actually committed an irregularity should be the first to discuss and discredit his method of investigation?

“All these people seem to me to suffer from megalomania. Just because luck made this man the first to give a piece of sensational news, he now allows himself to do anything he likes. The *World* seems to be pursuing an investigation on its own account and vying with me. After all, though, were it not for this mention of the footprints, which may prove inconvenient, this article can only be useful to me. If the real culprit thinks that attention is directed altogether in the wrong quarter, he may not hide so carefully, and may even give himself away. . . . All the same, I shall know better another time how to deal with reporters.”

He took the paper to his secretary, and said to him:

"Have you seen this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what do you think of it?"

"It might be useful to see this Coche, even if you don't want to give away much of what you think. He will be quite satisfied with a few irrelevant scraps of information, if we don't give the same to the others. . . ."

"But what do you think of his hypothesis —altogether the opposite of mine?"

"It seems just as good as any other journalist's. None of the reports that have come in the last forty-eight hours have provided us with anything really in favour of *our* idea . . . nor of any one else's."

The Commissioner stood still a moment; then he said, half to himself:

"There's not a shadow of a doubt. I'm quite sure I'm right." And he added, aloud: "Just ring up the *World*, and ask them to send me this Monsieur Coche as soon as he comes. I'll go back to Boulevard Lannes and see to a few more details, so that the Examining Magistrate may find everything ready when he takes up the case."

. . . . .

29, Boulevard Lannes was in exactly the same condition as when the Commissioner had left it two days before, except that the body of the victim had been conveyed to the public mortuary, after a careful and minute registration of all details concerning it.

Yet there was something peculiarly harrowing about that room now. The bed lay still unmade, with its cold, crumpled sheets. The rancid smell of blood had given place to that peculiar smell of soot and smoke that always seems to fill uninhabited houses. The ashes piled up in the fireplace had become darker. In the basin, the reddish water seemed to have changed colour, and the tiny red clots suspended in it showed clearly; and along the edge of this water was a border of an indistinct grey made of soap and blood. . . . The remainder of life, as it were, which was still about the place when the Commissioner had entered it for the first time had now quite flickered away.

All human beings leave behind them a reflection of their personality or, at least, of their existence; the walls of their habitations—con-

stant dumb witnesses of their lives—preserve a trace of it for some time; and the history of men continues in the dwellings which they have inhabited, even after they are gone. The room where human beings have loved and suffered is a mysterious and yet speaking witness to those who know how to see and understand. There are apartments, no matter whether rich or poor, gay or sad, that seem hostile to any new occupant. After all, is it so perfectly impossible that there should be a deep and unsuspected life in what we call inanimate objects? Is it not the quick succession of inhabitants of one night or one day that gives that impersonal and commonplace character to the rooms of a hotel? The furniture is sometimes very like that of the home one longs for. The rosewood bedstead, the wardrobe with its glass mirror, the dressing-table with its flowery chintz, the foliage pattern on the curtains, the mat by the bed, the mantelpiece with its gilt clock and its china candlesticks, the little what-not with its imitation Dresden ornaments—all these things are the same as one finds in many an old village house.

How is it, then, that in these old houses the same things look cheerful and friendly?—unless it be that they take up some mysterious character of life from human beings—a character which is weakened little by little and fades away when those who lent it for a time disappear from their places. . . . Things are like people: they forget.

Thus, in a few hours, the room where the crime had been committed—a room now empty, sinister, dead—had forgotten its guest!

“How chilly it is here,” murmured the Commissioner. . . .

He began to walk slowly about, examining the walls and the furniture and the corners, where darkness seemed to have taken shelter. He stopped near the dressing-table, fidgeting absent-mindedly with a ruler that lay there; then he noticed and examined an overturned clock, which pointed exactly to twenty minutes past twelve.

At the best of times a clock is a mysterious, in a sense, an awesome thing. This machine, made by the hand of man, marking time, regulating our lives and advancing continually at

an even pace towards the impenetrable future, seems to stand in regard to ourselves as the spy of Fate.

What hour was registered here? Was it an hour of the day or the darkness? Was it noon, with its broad and joyous sunshine, or was it the black and silent hour of midnight? Had the hands stopped thus simply by chance, or was this hour which they told the very minute that preceded the crime? Had this clock, an impassive looker on, witnessed the last second of life of the murdered man? . . .

"We must consult an expert," said the Commissioner. "He may be able to tell us why this clock stopped. We must find out whether it was stopped by its fall."

"Excuse me, sir," said an inspector, picking up three small bits of paper, "this seems very odd! We did not notice these papers the first time. . . ."

The Commissioner took them in his hands, and read:

"Monsieur

22

esi  
ue de

E.V."

He shrugged his shoulders:

"I don't think that *that* matters. What can you make out of these few syllables? . . . No use bothering. . . ."

"They may mean nothing, of course; but who knows? . . . If we could find the missing bits. . . . Now that I look at these, I think they are parts of an envelope. If we put them in order they make up something like an address:

" 'Monsieur—22—ue de—E.V.' There is also 'esi,' which may belong to the name of a street or to the name of the man. We can, anyhow, be sure that the man lives at 22 of a street '*de*' . . . that makes it already easier to find him."

"Much good will it do us," said the Commissioner, laughing.

The inspector went on turning the bits of paper over and over, smelling them, holding them up to the light. Suddenly he exclaimed:

"Hullo! This is better still. . . . Look! We've only been examining the front side, but on the back is written:

'Not known at No. 22'

and on the other bit:

**'Try 16'**

and here, just by the side, there's half the postmark: 'Rue Bay' . . . which must certainly mean Rue Bayen; that's not difficult. In the centre of the postmark there's something black that must have been the date above, and below, very clearly: ' '08.' We are still in January; this letter cannot have been sent very long ago. I see no way out of it. You may think as you please, sir, but *I* think it would be well worth our while to find the unknown gentleman in the Rue de . . . I don't know what, who no doubt had previously resided at 16 of another street, or even perhaps of the same. . . ."

"Go ahead. . . . As for me, I would give the whole of your discoveries for the tiniest bit of information about the life and habits of the victim. . . . Can you see anything more? No? . . . Now we can go."

And the Commissioner went off, followed by the two inspectors.

There were still some loafers on the boule-



vard, and also policemen mounting guard before the house. A photographer had put up his camera to take views of the house; and he was taking them from every conceivable side. Just as the Commissioner was about to enter the carriage he exclaimed, addressing him:

“One second, sir . . . there, thank you.”

“You seem very pleased to have my portrait; do you think it will amuse your readers? . . . What paper is it for?”

“For the *World*, sir. The first . . .”

“In that case,” said the Commissioner, flaring up, “you may tell your people from me . . . well—no—tell them nothing at all. . . .”

## VI

### “NOT KNOWN AT No. 22”

**T**HAT day was rather dull both for the Police and for Coche. This affair, which had seemed to grow more important every moment as the public curiosity waxed greater, had now come to a temporary standstill. The shop-people of the neighbourhood only disclosed vague recollections of a quiet, rather silent, little old man who seemed to have no relations or friends. He had lived there several years, scarcely going out at all, speaking still less, and only receiving letters at very long intervals. The postman did not remember having knocked at his door for months. He said:

“I didn’t even call for a Christmas box; you really don’t want a tip from people you never do anything for.”

As for Onesimus Coche, the waiting began to unnerve him. He would have liked both to hasten events and to delay them. He was just beginning to realise the enormous complications which he had brought into his life, and to see the results which he expected from this adventure in less brilliant colours. The one certainty for the time being was that he was a wanderer, that he dared not stop anywhere, could not ask for any news, was tormented by the strong desire to see again the scene of the crime . . . for all the world as if he were a criminal himself.

"And," thought he to himself, "it wouldn't be half a bad idea to go there. They must, of course, have laid a police trap in the Boulevard Lannes; among the crowd that passes before the house there are sure to be as many policemen in plain clothes as there are fools; and they know me quite well. The *World*, with all the mystery about its articles, is rather putting out the Police, and I think they would not fail to run me in. . . . After that things would go on splendidly."

But the mere thought of really coming into contact with the Police frightened him.

His loneliness of the last two days seemed to have taken out of him all the energy and the "go" which made him so incomparable, a reporter when he was interested at all. He was by nature very dependent on his surroundings and on the half-intoxication of speech, of discussion, of fight, of a breathless and unceasing activity. Deprived of this stimulus, all his strength and power of decision seemed to evaporate. As he was at present—elbowing his way through crowds of unknown people, or sitting in solitude at cafés and restaurants, never hearing the sound of his own voice except when he ordered his meals or a drink—he experienced, though still free in Paris and surrounded by thousands of human beings, the same dismal sense of isolation as if he had been in the most secluded of prison cells.

About five o'clock he rang up the *World*. But the line was engaged. He waited a moment and then called again. The line was very much taken up; snatches of conversation reached him confusedly amid the nasal tones

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of the attendants who repeated the call numbers. Suddenly, amid all that noise and buzzing, he heard somebody saying:

“The editor’s office, the *World*?”

He bent quickly over the mouthpiece and said:

“I beg your pardon, sir, I beg your pardon; I called first . . .”

“I’m sorry; they seem to have attended to me. Hullo! the *World*? . . .”

“Damned impertinence! Hullo, Exchange!”

At the other end of the wire there was somebody laughing.

He stamped impatiently.

“Hullo, miss; you have put two of us on the same line. . . .”

“Sorry, sir. Please put back the receiver. . . .”

“No, I won’t! I’ve been waiting here for a quarter of an hour. Put me through to the clerk-in——”

He did not finish the word, but took down the second receiver and listened. He could quite distinctly hear the whole conversation. He had never known the line so still, nor had

he ever overheard a more interesting conversation than the present.

The man who had annoyed him a moment ago was saying:

"That's awkward. What time does he generally come?"

And another voice, which he knew at once was that of the sub-editor, spoke back:

"About half-past four or five. But it's no good relying upon him."

"What a nuisance!" said the first voice. "Can you tell me where I am likely to find him?"

Coche thought to himself: "Where in the world have I heard that voice before?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Avyot.

"Well, he's sure to come in during the evening, isn't he? Would you mind asking him to call round . . . an important communication. . . ."

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible, sir. I am extremely sorry. . . . But he's away, and I haven't the slightest . . ."

"But when will he be back?" said the voice.

"I don't know. . . . He may be a long time away or he may come back very soon. . . ."

"He hasn't left Paris, has he?"

"I can't tell you, sir. I am extremely sorry—extremely. . . ."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Coche, more and more excited, "they are talking about me, and that voice . . . that voice . . ."

"Don't cut us off, miss. We haven't finished," called out Avyot.

And Coche, quite carried away by his interest in this dialogue, instinctively called out too: "We haven't finished!"

Then immediately he bit his lip; it was pure luck that he could overhear a conversation concerning himself; and he must not be mad enough to interrupt it. Fortunately the attendant had already gone away and did not hear him. The dialogue went on.

"In any case," said the first voice, "will you give me his address?"

"Certainly."

"Is there any chance of my finding him at home?"

"By Jove!" murmured Coche. "I was quite right; it's the Commissioner."

A little shiver ran over him. His fingers tightened automatically on the receiver, and he could *feel* himself grow pale. Why was the Commissioner so insistent, wanting to see him or to know his address, unless . . . He had not the courage to frame the end of his sentence, even in his own mind, but the word which he feared shaped itself before him with quite wonderful clearness and strength: "To ARREST me! they're going to ARREST me!"

It was now too late to draw back. No hesitation was possible. The last three days had fled so rapidly that he had not realised the passing of time, and he now felt that there was no escape. He hoped for a moment that the sub-editor would not answer; he nearly cried out:

"Don't! *don't* give my address!"

But that would have seriously compromised him; and, although he *did* want to be arrested and accused and examined, he was anxious to be able at any time to shatter by a word the accusations brought against him. And how



could he have explained such a cry of anguish as this? . . .

The voice went on:

"I don't know whether you'll find him, but here's his address. . . ."

For the tenth part of a second the idea that perhaps they were not talking about him, after all, crossed Coche's mind. Avyot went on:

"16, Rue de Douai."

"Thank you; I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"Not at all. Good-bye, Monsieur le Commissaire."

"Good-bye."

Coche heard them ring off; there was a little buzzing on the wire, and then all was still.

He remained there listening, expecting, hoping, fearing he knew not what, nailed to the spot by intense emotion. It was two or three minutes before he became once more really conscious of his surroundings. As he turned to go out, and seized the door-handle, he had a moment's hesitation: What if there were somebody just behind that door, whose hand would fall heavily on his shoulder?

The fact of his innocence did not even occur to him at that moment. He could only think this one thought: They are sure to arrest me now.

Of course, he still might choose to speak out the whole truth. The worst risk he ran was, after all, only a few days' imprisonment, or simply a rather severe and humiliating admonition. . . . But he *could* not, somehow, speak the truth now; he was fascinated, hypnotised by this fixed idea:

*"They are going to arrest me!"*

And this thought, while it frightened him, yet attracted him, allured him with obscure and formidable power. It was horrible as the magnetic attraction of a precipice, seductive as the treacherous call of a siren over sounding waters.

At last he went out. No one paid attention to him. Only the clerk behind the counter said:

"Two calls, sir."

"All right," said Coche.

And he paid the second fee without remonstrance, though he had not spoken at all.

It *did* occur to him to ring up the *World*;

but he reflected that by now any move on his part was superfluous; and so he went off, trying to imagine what could have put the Police so soon on his track, and feeling, on the whole, rather annoyed that he had needed no greater ingenuity to attract their attention to himself.

After his conversation over the telephone, the Commissioner went at once to the inspectors' office. One of the men, seated at a table, seemed engrossed in important research.

The Commissioner addressed him:

"Are you doing something very urgent?"

The man smiled.

"Urgent? No . . . but the sooner it's done the better. I am looking in the directory for the streets beginning with '*de*,' about that paper we found this morning. . . . It's always worth trying. . . ."

"Well, please leave that alone for a minute. Take a cab, and see if Mr. Onesimus Coche is at home—16, Rue de Douai."

"Rue *de*? . . ." repeated the inspector, with a start.

"Rue de Douai, 16. . . . You know where it is? . . ."

"Yes, yes; that's not it . . . it's that No. 16, and then Rue *de* . . ."

It was the Commissioner's turn to start now.

He had paid no attention to this number; now it suddenly seemed to acquire great significance. It was the very number that he had read that morning on the piece of envelope picked up at the house in the Boulevard Lannes. . . . He looked at the inspector and the inspector looked at him, and they remained like that for a few seconds, without daring to put into words the suspicion which had suddenly crossed their minds.

"Well," said the Commissioner, shrugging his shoulders, "what next? . . . That's the way one gets on the wrong tack. An idea comes into one's mind; one jumps at it; one won't let go; one becomes infatuated with it . . . and then it's nothing at all. If you start looking suspiciously at everybody who lives at a No. 16 . . ."

"Of course, one can't tell, but it seems odd. . . . I am off at once."

The Commissioner would not appear to give the least importance to his subordinate's idea

now, because in the morning he had thought his discovery of no value, and again, now, he had not been the first to observe what was, after all, a rather strange coincidence. He was annoyed not to have discovered the papers or seen the possible connection, himself. Still, he did not attribute much importance to it yet; what likelihood was there that Coche should have anything to do with the business? Was he to build a whole theory of his guilt on a simple coincidence of numbers? He went back to his office, saying to himself:

“No. . . . it’s absurd. . . .”

But, however absurd the thing might seem to him, he could not dismiss it from his mind. He took up a sheaf of papers and began examining them one by one. But at the end of the first he became aware that—although he had read every line—he knew nothing at all about its contents. The only things that came back to his mind were a No. 16 dancing before him, and the features of Onesimus Coche slowly rising with it, at first rather dim, and then quite clear.

Little by little a number of lesser details crowded into his memory.

First there was the information given by the *World*, the source of which he had been unable to discover; then the mysterious manner of Coche, his attitude, sarcastic enough to be almost insolent; his oracular replies; his discovery of the footprints; his half-faint in the room of the crime . . . all these to a certain point formed circumstantial evidence against him. . . . But, if the reporter had taken a part in the crime, how could one imagine so much daring? . . . and yet! . . .

Having reached this point in his argument, he came to a standstill: there seemed to be no adequate motive for Coche's demeanour. Still, he would not worry; in a few moments he would know what to think of the whole thing. Without giving Coche any inkling of the suspicion which had crossed his mind, he would make him understand how unusual his attitude appeared. He was quite sure now that Coche knew all about the crime. The difficulty would be to worm out of him not what

he knew, but, indeed, *how* he knew it. Had not Coche already said to him:

"The Press has many and various means of investigation"?

What were its means in this case? It was important for him to know, and he would not stop short of intimidation, if necessary, in order to find out. There was also this: that the business was about to be put into the hands of the Examining Magistrate, and he wanted to present a plain statement, cleared of all the mystery which had surrounded this affair from the beginning.

There was a ring at the telephone:

"What is it?" said he.

"Javel, the inspector you sent to Rue de Douai."

"Well?"

"Monsieur Coche has not been home for three days."

An expression of blank astonishment came upon the Commissioner's face. So, for three days this reporter had not been seen either at his office or at his own house? However unfounded his suspicion might be, yet how could

one account for this sudden disappearance without finding some serious reason for it? Considering what the events of the last few days had been, and how swiftly and mysteriously they had succeeded one another, a "serious" reason must surely in this case be one in some way connected with the murder of the Boulevard Lannes. If so, there were two possible hypotheses: either Onesimus Coche had disappeared on purpose to conduct his inquiry independently and without interference, or else he had had a hand in the drama; and in this latter case he probably had put the frontier and a few hundred miles between the Police and himself—unless, indeed, it had been to somebody's interest to suppress him, and his disappearance had been entirely involuntary. . . .

Still following his own impulsive and rather fantastic method of reasoning, the Commissioner made up his mind that his last idea was the right one.

He put his mouth to the speaking-tube and said to the inspector:

"Is that all?"



The inspector did not answer at once, so the Commissioner called out:

"Hullo! are you there?"

"Yes, sir; that's all."

"Very good, then; I shall see to it myself to-morrow morning."

And he put back the receiver.

"To-morrow morning, my dear sir," thought the inspector to himself, "the game will be all over; for if by to-morrow Coche is not in my hands, it will mean that he is not wanted in yours, either."

He had, indeed, not told the Commissioner all he knew, for he wanted to work out his own idea himself. He was too young in the profession to be much listened to if he gave advice, so he had made up his mind to follow in this case his own personal inspiration. Ever since he had found that bit of envelope he had somehow had an instinctive feeling that the game was to hinge entirely upon this bit of paper; and this instinct, at first quite indefinite, had suddenly grown clear and conscious when he had heard the number in Coche's address. He was almost sorry now that he had betrayed

his thoughts in the presence of the Commissioner; but, on the other hand, he knew that his chief was too proud to adopt the suggestion of a mere subordinate, and this consoled him for his want of self-possession. More than that: he began to think that he had done a very clever thing in showing his feelings. The very fact that he had established some connection between the two "sixteens" made it now certain that the Commissioner would not attach the slightest importance to that fact; on the contrary. Therefore, from this moment he might go freely on his way without let or hindrance.

The reader knows that Javel was not quite right there; but he was right in the main, owing to the Commissioner's hasty manner of argument. Whilst his chief was interpreting events, Javel was content with ascertaining them. Indeed, he had obtained one piece of information, and that with the greatest ease, which threw that morning's discovery and the other information collected at Coche's own house quite into the shade.

Going down the Rue de Douai he had happened to look mechanically at a certain house

whose number was 22. There was no mistake; Fate seemed to insist that this number should strike his eye, and Javel had too much belief in Fate to refuse to obey its dictates. He reflected that, after all, if it was all a mistake no one need ever know anything about it, and that his course of action here would neither compromise anybody nor take up much time. So he went in.

The porter's box opened on to the porch. He half opened the door.

"Mr. Onesimus Coche, please?"

"Don't know him."

Javel put on a disappointed expression and insisted, though with a certain timidity:

"He's a newspaper correspondent. Couldn't you tell me . . ."

The porter, who was warming his hands by the fire, shook his head in denial without turning round, but his wife came out of a little back room and inquired what the gentleman wanted. Javel guessed that she was, if not obliging, at least inquisitive; so he repeated:

"I want to find a journalist—Mr. Onesimus Coche. I was told that he lived here. There

must have been a mistake in the address, and I wanted to know if you could . . ."

The husband shrugged his shoulders, but the woman came forward.

"Why, can't you remember?"

Then she turned to the inspector, and she added:

"There's nobody of that name in this house now, but there used to be a newspaper gentleman, who went away about six months ago; the postman has made a mistake several times since then and left letters here addressed to that name. . . ."

Then she turned again to her husband.

"Don't you remember? He left one just the other day. . . . Try No. 16 or 18."

Javel apologised for the trouble, thanked them, and went out. When he was in the street he gave free vent to his joy, exclaiming aloud to himself:

"It's the right scent, it's the right scent! I have him!"

He was so excited that he ran up against an old man, without noticing it, and the man turned round and grumbled:

"Hullo, what's he up to?" The inspector, in his joy, did not even hear it. He walked up quickly to No. 16, and asked:

"Monsieur Coche?"

"He is not in, sir."

"Do you know when he will be back?"

"No; he must have gone on a journey."

"What a nuisance!" murmured Javel. . . .

"Then you can't tell me when I can find him in?"

"No, sir. Would you like to leave him a note? We can give it to him with his letters. There's all his mail for three days."

"Three days," thought Javel. "Am I *really* on the right track then?"

And he added, half aloud, as if speaking to himself:

"A note? . . . Well . . ."

Then, remembering that there might be some information to be gleaned out of this woman, and that she would be less on her guard against a visitor talking disconnectedly while he wrote a letter than against one standing on the threshold, he replied:

"Yes, if I may, I should like to write a word."

"Certainly, sir; take a seat. Have you anything to write with?"

"No."

When the woman had brought him ink, pen, and paper he sat down at her desk and began to write a rather vague begging-letter, saying that he was a journalist out of work and in very low water, and begging his colleague to assist him if he could.

When he came to the end of the page he stopped, and picked up the sheet of note-paper and waved it to and fro to dry it.

"A little blotting-paper?"

"Oh, thanks, if it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all. . . . An envelope?"

"Yes, please."

While he was slowly drying his page he asked:

"Had Mr. Coche not told you that he was going?"

"No; his charwoman came the day before yesterday just as usual. She did not know anything about his going, and asked me the same

question as yourself. She comes every morning to tidy up, but she has no news. . . . It's quite unlike him, because almost invariably whenever he goes away he says to me:

“‘Madame Isabelle, I am going away for so many days; I shall be back on Monday or Tuesday’ . . . and anything that may be wanted in case he’s asked for . . .”

Javel, still holding his pen in his hand, sat listening. The more he heard about it, the more this sudden departure looked to him like flight; and, adding to this the extraordinary coincidence of the numbers 22 and 16, he could not help connecting this disappearance with the inquiry about the Boulevard Lannes.

The woman went on speaking, describing Coche’s very regular mode of life, and the hours of his coming and going. All that—for the time being, at least—mattered not at all. But suddenly the inspector grew interested again.

“The last time that he slept here,” the woman was saying, “he came back, as usual, about two in the morning. One can’t tell people’s voices very well at night, but I know his way

of shutting the door, quite gently, without any noise. Other people bang it hard enough to wake the whole household.—Well, at five o'clock exactly some one came for him; they didn't stop very long in his room, for about five minutes later they called again to have the door opened, and after a minute Monsieur Coche went out too. I think he must have been called home because somebody was very ill; his people live in the country."

"That's just possible," thought the inspector to himself, "but only *just*; there are really too many coincidences in all this. . . ."

He went on writing, signed the first name that came into his head, and sealed the envelope. The porter had said all she knew, and there was nothing more to be expected from her now. Perhaps the charwoman might know some more.

He got up.

"It would be very kind of you to give him this with his other letters. As it is very urgent, I will call again to-morrow morning about nine o'clock, in case Mr. Coche is back. . . ."



"That's right, sir; anyhow, you will find his charwoman."

He thanked her and went out. There was no more doubt in his mind that the receiver of the torn-up envelope found in the house in the Boulevard Lannes and Onesimus Coche were one and the same person. The question now was: was the journalist's sudden departure on the night of the crime more than a mere coincidence, or was it not? This was a much more delicate question to answer, and one which must be looked into closely and coolly.

The inspector was at this point in his reflections when he rang up the Commissioner to tell him the result of his inquiry; but he gave no more information than was sufficient to answer the question put to him: He had been sent to No. 16, Rue de Douai to find out whether Coche was at home; Coche was not. For the present nothing need be added. The rest of his doings was his own business, and he would mind it himself.

It was Javel's habit, when trying to catch a man, to think, not what would be the cleverest thing for himself to do, but rather what

was the most stupid thing possible for the other man. Now, the worst mistake that Coche could make if he were guilty was to come home again; therefore Javel expected him to come home. When a man has the choice between two alternatives, it is very rarely, especially if he stands in fear of the Police, that he chooses the better. The most elementary common sense would have prevented the reporter from coming back to the Rue de Douai; it was therefore in the Rue de Douai that he must be expected.

Having come to this conclusion, Javel mounted guard a few steps away from the door, and waited.

## VII

### TWELVE HOURS—6 P.M. TO 6 A.M.

ONESIMUS COCHE came out of the telephone box and pulled himself together. For three days he had seen and learnt nothing—nothing except the anguish of a hunted man; a subject, that, for good, sound literature, but not for the sensational newspaper copy for which he was in search. He was in the dark about everything at the very moment when he wanted to *know* everything; and he now understood that being in the dark about events must be for a guilty man the most unnerving part of his condition. Moreover, as for Onesimus Coche, the poor devil had not been able to change his clothes, and this detail counts for a great deal. His soiled collar felt uncomfortable; his cuffs were dirty, and he was altogether ill at ease. Physical discomfort was

added to his moral discomfort. He resolved to go home—after the gas had been put out in the house so that the porter should not see him. And towards midnight he stopped before his own door. Javel, who had come up softly, smiled with triumph on recognising Coche's face. The mouse had come to the trap. The inspector continued his beat without taking his eye off the doorway. Two policemen, observing that he looked insistently at that house, said to him rather roughly:

“What are you waiting for here?”

He replied, “Police!” scarcely turning his head, and showed his papers.

About half an hour later, seeing that Coche did not come out again, Javel thought to himself:

“Surely he won't have the daring to sleep at home.” . . . Then he reflected: “Well, after all, if he really is not guilty, and if his departure has nothing to do with the crime, there'd be nothing surprising in that. He went into the room of the crime in the Boulevard Lannes with my chief, and he may have dropped those bits of paper then. And yet . . .”

He was so anxious, so eager to know, that he was not even conscious of the cold. There were fewer and fewer passers-by, and his watch became all the easier. He walked to and fro, quite sure that the journalist could not go out without being seen. At last, about two o'clock, the door opened. Coche stood for a moment quite still on the threshold and shut the door after him noiselessly. Javel watched him, saw him hesitate, then take a few steps, look right and left, and then walk away straight ahead. He gave him a start of a few yards, and then set off to follow him.

They went on like this as far as the boulevard, then on to the embankment by the Rue de Richelieu, and across the river.

"I'm hanged if I know where he is taking me to," murmured Javel, seeing that he went on in the direction of the Place Saint-Michel, "but he can go where he pleases. I shan't let go of him until I've tracked him home."

Coche went up the Boulevard Saint-Michel and on by the Luxembourg; then he stopped, looking about him.

"What does it mean?" thought Javel.

## TWELVE HOURS—6 P.M. TO 6 A.M. 183

"Surely he knows this part . . . and he looks as if he didn't know what he wanted. . . ."

Half aloud, he said:

"Get along, young man; it's time to go to bed. . . ."

Just then Coche turned round: their eyes met. Javel made no sign, but Coche started and walked off again more quickly towards the observatory. The boulevard was deserted, and the detective watched the shadow of the reporter in flight over the dry, white pavement. This race towards an unknown goal was beginning to tell on his own nerves; he felt both the cold and the fatigue. Now and then he had a strong temptation to spring on Coche and collar him. But if he was innocent, what a mistake this would be; it meant apologising and no end of a bother. So he went on with his fists clenched, nursing his rage. Coche must surely end by going into a house; and then *he* would have to wait until daylight outside in the icy night, with no hope of food, with his feet frozen and his hands numbed. . . .

All of a sudden a voice behind him said softly:

"Good morning, Javel."

He turned round and saw one of his Police colleagues. What a relief! He put a finger across his lips, took his friend by the arm, and said to him in a whisper:

"Sssssh! Be quiet! . . ."

"Anything up?"

"Yes, look in front of us, twenty yards away."

"Do you mean it?"

"Don't I! . . . I believe I've got . . . But I can't tell you just yet. Look here, if you're not too tired, I have a plan for you. Keep up with my man, and don't let him go. I believe I've got something quite first-class. . . ."

"You can't tell me . . .?"

"Not now; in a few hours I will. . . . I'm quite done up; besides, I think our friend has seen me and that I'm no use. He won't be on his guard against you. Will you?"

"Well," said the other one, "if it's any good to you! You want me to track him down? . . ."

"That's the first thing; then you stick to his door. To-morrow morning at ten o'clock send word to me where he ends his night and where

## TWELVE HOURS—6 P.M. TO 6 A.M. 185

I can come to relieve you. I shall be before No. 16, Rue de Douai, but for heaven's sake don't let go of him for a minute! We may never have such a fine quarry again. . . . And you shall have your bit of the cake if it comes off, I promise you."

"All this sounds very nice; but, all the same, I should like to know . . ."

"Well," said Javel, seeing that his comrade was wavering, and that he must play an open game unless he was prepared to risk the whole thing; "well, I am probably following up the murderer of the Boulevard Lannes."

He was not in the least certain that Coche was the murderer, but he realised that, if he hesitated now, his companion would probably refuse to go on. The attraction of such a catch was enough to make the other fall in at once with his plan, but the thing seemed almost impossible; so he asked:

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," said Javel firmly. "You see that it's worth it?"

"You may reckon upon me; I've got him."



"And, above all, no blunders. The black-guard has a sight . . . and such legs! . . ."

"So have I."

"Ten o'clock, a messenger: 16, Rue de Douai."

"Right you are."

Javel turned on his heel and went back towards the centre of Paris. He was happy now: Coche would not escape him; and, if he *had* made a mistake, no one except the comrade who had now the same interest in the business as himself, and would keep it dark if it did not come off, would know how he had spent his night.

Coche had not turned round again since that first time near the Luxembourg. He went on straight before him at random, aware of the danger in which he stood, more by instinct than by the glimpse he had had of the Police official. Now and then he slackened his steps in order to hear better the sound of that other footfall which regulated itself according to his own. For one second, when the two policemen had met, he thought he had been saved. If there had been a cross-road near him at that

## TWELVE HOURS—6 P.M. TO 6 A.M. 187

moment he would have run down it at full speed; but there was none. Soon the sound of the footsteps behind him reached him more clearly still; and he had understood that, instead of one man behind him, there were now two. The anguish of this night was even more acute for him than that of the first night of the crime had been, when he walked alone up the deserted boulevard. And yet it was of the same kind. He was seized with the same fear of the unknown; his ears were filled by the same motionless silence; the more he hurried on the long road that stretched before him the less he seemed to advance. He could feel the men's eyes resting upon him; he could detect the whispered sound of their words, as if the imperceptible shiver that they set up in the air was a succession of sound-waves that could reach him through all that distance. His nervousness was such that he gripped the butt-end of his revolver with the intention of suddenly turning round and pulling the trigger. One thought only—and that a most unaccountable one—stopped him from committing this mad action: the fear that he would find nobody

there, and would be obliged to realise that he was losing his mind.

Madness had always appeared to him as one of the most frightening things possible, and the idea that his reason might have given way filled him with a vague terror. He was gradually becoming conscious of loss of mastery over himself, and of a horrible fear which took possession of him, paralysing his will and falsifying his judgment. Quite suddenly he felt himself overcome with fatigue, the kind of fatigue that wears arms and legs to the breaking point, against which one *feels* that there is no fighting; it makes the feet leaden and the mind a blank, driving out even a sense of grief, danger, remorse. He hesitated, seized by an imperious need of sleep which tortured him like hunger or thirst. He went on with his teeth clenched and his throat gripped by fear, and repeated to himself:

“Go on! . . . Go on! . . .”

At the very bottom of the Avenue d'Orleans, near the gate of the town, he saw the lamp of an hotel. He rang and waited, leaning against the wall for the door to be opened. Then he

## TWELVE HOURS—6 P.M. TO 6 A.M. 189

asked for a room, threw himself, dressed as he was, on the bed, without even taking the precaution to bolt or lock his door, and was plunged into a sleep as deep as death.

Two minutes later the detective, who did not care to spend the night in the cold, rang too, and, putting on a perfectly natural voice and look, said to the man:

“Please give me a room next to that of my friend who has just come in, and call me when he wakes up, but don’t tell him that I am there. I am playing a little trick on him.”

He climbed the stairs three by three, and as soon as the man had left the room he put his ear to the wall; he could hear Coche’s deep and even breath. Then he stretched himself on his bed, and, sure that he would not lose his man, he fell asleep in his turn. . . .

That night Coche dreamt that he was in a prison and that a jailer was watching over his sleep: a dream strangely near the truth. For the last few hours he had ceased to be a free man and had been only a hunted animal, possessed of a growing consciousness that he was

surrounded by a circle of bloodhounds ever closing in upon him. . . .

At eight o'clock in the morning Javel took up his watch again before 16, Rue de Douai. He might have simply gone straight up to Coche's apartment to talk with the charwoman, but he preferred to avoid the porter, and waited about until she had left her box. As it is unheard of, in Paris, that a woman porter can be over an hour without moving from her post—especially during the morning at the hour of gossip—he was sure he could soon pass without being seen. Indeed, a few minutes later the porter went out. He immediately walked in and, although he did not know on what floor were the reporter's rooms, he was in no way troubled by such a detail, but rang at the first door he came to, and asked:

“Monsieur Coche, if you please?”

“Not here; fourth floor.”

“I beg your pardon.”

On the fourth floor the door was opened by an old woman.

“Is your master in?” said Javel in the tone of voice of a man who asks the question as a

## TWELVE HOURS—6 P.M. TO 6 A.M. 191

mere formality, being quite sure at that time of the morning "the master" must be there.

"No, sir. . . ."

He smiled, and went on:

"Tell him who it is . . . he will be sure to see me. . . . You need only say my name—Monsieur . . ."

"But, sir, my master is not at home."

"I should have thought. . . . That is most annoying. . . . Can you tell me when he will be back?"

The woman put up her hands.

"I can't tell at all now. He's been away four days . . . he may be back any moment, or he may not."

"The thing is," said Javel, "that I want rather badly to see him."

"Can I do anything for you, sir?" said the woman. "Come in; perhaps he may soon be back."

"Yes. . . . I will wait a minute."

He went into the study and sat down, wondering how he could start a conversation. But he need not have troubled about that. The

charwoman took it all upon herself, and, without his addressing her at all, she went on:

"Yes, he's been away four days. That's funny, seeing that he never goes away without telling. There are letters for him—telegrams. People come here to ask for him, and we can't tell them anything."

"Perhaps he's gone to his home."

"Oh, no, it can't be that. His portmanteau's here . . . and then, he went away so queerly, sir. . . ."

"Did you see him go off?"

"No, sir. When I got here in the morning I found the bed unmade and his evening clothes on a chair. I cleaned up everything and put it tidy. I was rather surprised, because he never goes out before eleven; and when I went home for lunch, I don't know why, but I kept thinking it over, and do you know what I thought at first? . . . I must tell you that once before he went off like that, very early, to fight a duel. . . . Well, I thought to myself that perhaps he had done the same thing again. . . ."

"Oh, do you think so? . . . I should have heard of it. . . ."

## TWELVE HOURS—6 P.M. TO 6 A.M. 193

"Well, now I think as you do. But the first day, what put it into my head was that it looked as if he had been fighting. You are his friend, and so you know how careful he is——"

"Oh, yes," said Javel; "most careful. . . ."

"Well, his shirt-front was stained with blood, and . . ."

"And what?" said the detective, scarcely able to contain his excitement. . . .

"His shirt-cuff was all crumpled and torn, and he had lost one of his cuff-links—one of his links that he was so fond of, sir. . . ."

"His gold links, with the turquoises?"

"I don't know what you call them."

"Well," said Javel, almost stammering with joy, "little blue stones? . . ."

"That's it. Well, the button-hole was torn and the link was off; so, of course, you'd have thought, just as I did, that he had been quarrelling, only . . ."

Javel hastened to interrupt the old woman. Anything that she might wish to say now became a matter of no importance compared with the two invaluable statements which she had



already made: that there was blood on his shirt and—still more striking—that a cuff-link, like the one found in the room of the murder, had been lost from that same shirt!

But the thing seemed to him so astounding, and also Fate seemed to be helping him in such an extraordinary manner, that he decided he must make sure at once. So he pretended to be astonished, and said:

“Are you sure?”

“Am I sure! Since you know his links you shall see for yourself. I kept the shirt on purpose, in case he hadn’t noticed that the link was lost, and because he might think it was my fault. I’ll just show you.”

She went into the bedroom; but she had no sooner got in than she exclaimed:

“Well, upon my word! He has been here since yesterday, and has changed his clothes! The cupboard is all topsy-turvy. . . . Look, there’s his flannel shirt in the clothes basket; it wasn’t there yesterday.”

“By Jove!” thought Javel. “He can’t have taken away the bloodstained shirt and the other cuff-link when he came here in the night! In

any case, we should still have the old woman there to identify the link that *we* have got; but the proof would be less striking and conclusive. . . .”

He followed her into the bedroom, murmuring:

“What did you say? . . . That he changed his clothes here yesterday? . . .”

“Yes, and I’m sure of it. There’s his flannel shirt which he only wears in the morning; yesterday there was nothing in the basket but his evening shirt, with the bloodmark here . . . look . . . and the cuff torn—there. . . . As for the other half of the link—it’s there on the mantelpiece. . . . You see that I’m speaking the truth.”

If any one had shown the detective the most wonderful precious stone in the world, he could not have looked at it with the joy and the love with which he gazed upon this worthless little ornament. He turned it over and over, and the more he handled it and played with it with trembling fingers, the more his eye shone with pleasure, as the *certainty* won its way into his

mind that this link was identical with the one picked up at 29, Boulevard Lannes.

Thus, in less than twenty-four hours, with no clue but a little bit of paper and a few scraps of writing, he had succeeded in unravelling this mystery which had so long appeared insoluble! So long as he had only had this bit of envelope as a proof against Coche, he had scarcely dared to give a definite shape to his surmise. But now it was no longer possible to have a doubt about it; he could see it all in his mind with extraordinary clearness. The stain on the shirt-front was a splash of blood. The torn sleeve and broken cuff-link . . . did not everything in the room of the murder bear witness to a desperate hand-to-hand fight?

There was only one thing that remained inexplicable in the whole business, and that was Coche's attitude after the discovery of the crime; his smiling presence of mind, his desire to see the body of the victim—*his* victim!—in the presence of the Commissioner. And besides, what could explain the fact that a quiet, contented, honourable youth had suddenly become a thief and a murderer? . . . unless he

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had been seized by a sudden attack of insanity. . . . But that matter was no concern of his. What he cared about was that, following up a clue judged by others to be of no value, he had started upon a campaign all alone, and that the scent which he had followed had led him to his goal with the most astounding swiftness. In an hour's time the whole business would be clear. Coche would be arrested and safe under lock and key . . . "unless my pal has let him go," thought Javel. The mere idea made him boil with rage, and he said to himself to reassure himself:

"He couldn't, he *couldn't* have done that!"

Now that he knew all he could possibly learn, he was too anxious for news of the man he already considered his prisoner to stop a minute longer with the old woman. He looked at his watch and said:

"I'm afraid I can't wait any longer. I'm going away; but I shall be back again soon."

And as he pronounced these words, "I shall be back again," he smiled in spite of himself, experiencing a strange delight in the thought—a thought so simple and yet so weighted with

menace. In the archway he passed the porter with whom he had talked the day before, but this time he did not stop. He set foot in the street at half-past nine exactly. There he found a man pacing up and down before the door. As soon as the man saw him he came up to him and said under his breath:

“Javel?”

“Right,” said the detective, and he added:

“Where is he?”

“In the hotel at the corner of the Avenue d’Orleans and the Boulevard Brune . . . with his friend.”

“Good. Jump into a cab and go after them, and between you keep him there for an hour longer. If need be, don’t hesitate to lay hands upon him; I take the responsibility upon myself. You need not be afraid; it’s all right.”

The man went off. Javel got into a cab, told the driver to go to the police-station, and sat there rubbing his hands, joyful, triumphant. Just then no thought of reward or promotion even crossed his mind. He was joyous simply with the joy of success; he was full of a new, disinterested pleasure, and his heart swelled

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with such pride that he would not have given away his secret for all the world.

At the police-station he met a colleague, who whispered to him:

“Go up quickly; the chief is waiting for you. I think he’s got something to say to you.”

Javel shrugged his shoulders and answered without hurrying:

“That’s all right, that’s all right!”

He naturally expected to be pitched into, for having absented himself with no warning and without calling for orders; but with the turn events had taken, he had had neither time nor thought for such details. On the whole, he was not sorry to be met with a scowl; that would make rather a good set-off for the news he had to bring. So when he came in the presence of his chief, he let the storm take its course without interrupting it by the slightest protest.

The Commissioner was all the more irritable because the Examining Magistrate for this case had already been appointed, and the Commissioner found himself obliged to present a ridiculously insufficient report. He therefore

seized the occasion to vent his vexation upon somebody.

It was extraordinary that a police inspector could behave in such an entirely irresponsible manner! Who had told Javel not to come back? He had been charged with a special mission, and Javel allowed himself to consider his duty discharged simply by ringing his chief up on the telephone. And what if he was needed? Indeed, he *had* been needed . . . the other inspectors were all busy with other things; the Commissioner had reckoned upon him, had waited for him till eight o'clock the night before. If he had had a man at his orders then, he might perhaps be on the right scent. What answer could Monsieur Javel give to this? What explanation, what justification could he offer for his presumption?

"Sir," said Javel at last, carefully picking his words, "you are no doubt aware that I must have had some serious reason to prevent my attending to my duties here, as you wished me to do. The reason which I had is simply this: follow me, and in less than an hour I will present to you the assassin of the Boule-

vard Lannes, and you will have nothing to do but to arrest him. You see that I've not been at play all night, and as for the scent you mention, sir, unless it were the same as my own, I can assure you that it would have led you nowhere."

The Commissioner listened in open-mouthed astonishment. The announcement seemed to him so startling that he wondered whether the inspector was making fun of him, and he said, rather to make sure that he had really heard aright than out of mistrust of the man's judgment:

"Please say that again."

"I repeat, sir, that I've got the assassin of the Boulevard Lannes, and that in an hour's time you will have got him too."

"But how did you . . ."

"Well, sir, although I am quite sure of my business, we mustn't lose a minute just now; a bird in the hand, sir . . . let us go at once. On the way I will give you all the details. For the time being I will tell you just this, which is neither the least surprising nor the least decisive of them all: the murderer of the



old man at 29, Boulevard Lannes, the man whom I have pursued all night, whom a friend has tracked home in the Avenue d'Orleans, and is watching at this moment—the man, in short, whom you, sir, are coming to arrest—is Onesimus Coche.”

“Are you MAD?” cried the Commissioner.

“I think not . . . and if I tell you that the cuff-link found near the body is the twin brother of one reposing on the mantelpiece at 16, Rue de Douai, you will no doubt recognise that it may be a matter of interest to demand of Mr. Onesimus Coche an account of his doings on the night of the 18th.”

## VIII

### UNEASINESS

**O**NESIMUS COCHE woke up about half-past ten with a heavy head. During the night he had been agitated by so many fantastic dreams that he now found it difficult to collect his thoughts. He was at first astonished to find himself in a room which he had never seen before, and to realise that he was lying fully dressed upon a bed. It was very cold. Everything around him was uncomfortable, wretched, and dirty. Bits of old rag peeped out of the rusty fireplace; the wallpaper, a light design of pink and blue roses on a cream background, was soiled with grease or damp; the bed looked suspicious, the patched-up quilt was torn, and little tufts of wool fell out of it here and there. A woman's skirt hung over a portmanteau which stood up

on end in a corner. He had to look round him for a moment before the recollection of the visit to his own rooms and his aimless, hunted run over the boulevards came back to his mind. He tried to reason coolly with himself.

Had he really been followed? . . . Now, was it likely? Why should he choose to believe that, when it would have been so simple and natural to conclude that the man whom he passed on the Boulevard Saint-Michel was just a peaceful citizen? . . . This man had come exactly the way he had . . . well, what of that? The quarter he was now in was populous enough! The man might quite well have been going home . . . and yet he could not help shuddering when their eyes had met.

The anguish which he had succeeded in allaying for a moment seized upon him again. He shivered with cold, and the dismal misery of the room he was in seemed just the very setting for a sordid drama, a hovel which had no doubt witnessed all manner of human sin and degradation. He had slept the sleep of a free and innocent man on this rickety bed, where many criminals had probably spent their

nights, huddled up, their eyes wide open in the darkness, their hearing sharpened by suspense. He was now becoming familiar with this sense of the torture of fear which used to be dim and unreal in his mind. He understood the agony of these men; he pitied their exasperation; he realised how the criminal, suddenly transformed into a beast at bay, turns round in his den to face his pursuers and throws himself upon them, not for the sake of making them pay dearly for his life, but just for the savage joy of avenging, by murder, the horror of his endless nights.

The drama of his own capture was now enacted before his fancy. He saw himself thrown to earth, clutched by brutal hands; he felt hot human breath pass over his face . . . and there arose within him a feeling akin to that of a leader of a forlorn hope.

He got up, went over to the window, and looked into the street without daring to raise the curtain. He saw a man walking slowly to and fro on the pavement below. He thought the man raised his eyes in his direction, so he drew back, but continued to watch. For the

second time the man looked up. Then a cold perspiration broke over him. There was no possible doubt; that man was waiting, watching for somebody . . . and that somebody was himself! He tried to drive the absurd suspicion from his mind, but he could not, and the vision of his own struggles as he had pictured them a moment ago rose up again before him.

At the time of his greatest danger man, in his weakness, returns almost to the state of childhood. So deep is the trace of those early years that the thoughts and occupations, even the games of our first age remain when all acquired habits and reasoned principles count for nothing. Coche's reason, exhausted by the dreams of that night, was slowly clouding itself over. His fear changed into a kind of stupor so complete that he could almost believe his whole life was nothing but an illusion, a dream. And at this poignant moment he began involuntarily to play being the perpetrator of a crime, just as, in his childhood, he used to play all alone at fighting or at hunting, being himself both the general and

the soldier, the hunter and the quarry, and experiencing every emotion by turns, afraid at times of the sound of his own voice and the fury of his own gestures, acting for an imaginary spectator, who was none but himself, the gigantic and unsuspected dramas that live in the soul of a child.

In to-day's sinister game he naturally was the criminal. He knew himself to be watched. There were men mounting guard before his house; other men, he thought, were stealing up the stairs; he could hear the steps creaking beneath their feet. . . . The sound ceased, and then began again. A stifled sound of voices reached his ear. He soon caught the words, snatches of sentences: "He is there . . . take care . . . no noise. . . ." Then, nothing more. What was he to do? He was surrounded on all sides. There were spies under his window; he could not escape from there. Near the fireplace there was a door that opened into another room; but there were two big bolts: would he have time to unfasten them? No . . . must he wait till the door of his room should

open, and then rush head foremost on his assailant? . . . Yes, that was it. . . .

He picked up his revolver, and standing at bay, in a corner by the window, he waited. . . .

The voices—was it a dream or reality?—were more distinct. One said:

“At the least movement . . . you understand? . . .” Then there was a silence. Not even the sound of a passing vehicle in the street. Life seemed to have suddenly stopped. The tick-tack of an alarm in a room close by reached Coche distinctly. . . .

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. The knock seemed to Coche quite in keeping with his thoughts; not that he imagined for a moment that it was a servant coming to do the room. Was he not just playing at being trapped by the Police? They were there, of course, behind the door. . . . Of course, he must not answer: he stood quite still and gripped his revolver. There was another knock: silence again. Suddenly the door opened. He had made so sure that the door would give way under a violent thrust that he was almost stunned—he had forgotten that the night be-

fore he had omitted to lock it. He had scarcely time to level his revolver before he felt himself held by many hands, some grasping his shoulders, others wrenching his wrist. His surprise and pain were so great that he dropped his weapon and allowed himself to be handcuffed without resistance. It was only now that he understood what was happening, and saw that his game had been reality—that he was caught. He stood there, so roughly torn from his waking dream that the most extraordinary events could not now surprise him. Little by little he regained possession of himself as his ideas grew clearer. He heard the Commissioner say sarcastically:

“My congratulations, Monsieur Coche!”

This voice sufficed to call him back to reality. And by a strange recoil he was relieved at his capture. The thing he had been in such fear of for four days had now come to pass. He was caught!

He would at last be able to rest, and since he had committed no wrong, he would sleep the peaceful slumbers of those who, having nothing to reproach themselves with, can drop their



eyelids over eyes innocent of any vision of crime. Now at last—and for the first time perhaps since the night of the thirteenth—he had a clear idea that he was about to achieve his purpose, and that his triumphant journalist's work was about to begin. His features instinctively relaxed; he began to breathe deeply and freely. A smile of contemptuous irony curled his lips.

After having him searched from head to foot, and having the whole bed searched as well, the Commissioner said:

“Come along.”

“Excuse me,” said Coche, addressing the Commissioner—and how glad he was to hear his own voice—“would it be indiscreet to ask you, sir, what all this is about?”

“You have no inkling of it, I suppose?”

“I know that your men have thrown themselves upon me, have overpowered and bound me; I may add that they have locked my handcuffs more tightly than they need; but I don't know exactly what all this violence means, and I hope you will have the kindness to enlighten me. I search my memory in vain. I have no

recollection of any indiscretion of mine in the Press; and even if I were guilty of one, you would surely not bring ten policemen to capture me, among whom this gentleman," he added, pointing to Javel, "has graciously favoured me with his company since last night."

He had assumed such a confident manner that for a moment Javel, the Commissioner, and all the others thought to themselves:

"There must be a mistake! He can't have . . ."

But the same thought occurred to them all.

"If he has nothing on his conscience, why did he receive us with a revolver in his hand?"

And this reflection was strengthened in the mind of the Commissioner and that of Javel by the much more weighty and precise consideration:

"How can one account for his cuff-link having been found near the body?"

With that, they dismissed every shadow of doubt. Coche, with his hands bound, went downstairs between two inspectors.

The hotel-keeper, standing by the door, growled out:

"Yes, and so owing to this pretty business I lose my money for the room."

"My poor fellow," said Coche, "I am really distressed for you; but these gentlemen have thought fit to take my purse. Unless they are willing to give it back to me, you must apply to them for payment. . . ."

They pushed him into a prison van. He felt a momentary twinge of shame when he passed through the crowd which had collected by the door. As the conveyance started off a shrill voice rose from the crowd:

"Death to the murderer!"

There is always somebody about who gets wind of things. On this occasion, as on many others, the secret had transpired. Immediately the crowd gave vent to a yell of hatred, and out of the menacing roar an intermittent, wild, hoarse cry arose:

"Death! Death!"

They surrounded the van in a moment—men, women and children hung on to the springs and seized the horses' reins, shouting:

**"Out with him! Death! Death!"**

An inspector quickly put his head out of the window and said to the coachman:

**"What are you waiting for? Drive on! By . . ."**

Some policemen, who came up at last, succeeded in clearing the crowd away from the van, which started off amid vociferous booing. A few of the fiercest began to run after it, shouting with all their might:

**"Death! To the guillotine!"**

People who stood on their own doorsteps joined the procession for a few minutes, when they saw the van escorted by the police on their cycles, and joined in shouting:

**"Death! Death!"**

At last, at the crossing of the Rue d'Alesia, a block in the traffic, where two tramways from Mont-rouge and Gare de l'Est met from different directions, made it possible for the driver to get a little ahead and outrun some of his pursuers.

Coche, leaning back in a corner, had not opened his mouth since they left the house, except for a timid "Thank you" to one of the

inspectors when he pulled down the blind to protect Coche from the curiosity of the public. The yelling and the threats of the people had at first frightened him and then sickened him. So *that* was the Parisian crowd, was it?—the most intelligent crowd in the world! See what blind hatred could rise up immediately in this country, the cradle of all liberty—in this town, which had been the first to breathe forth words of justice and fraternity—against a man of whom nothing was known but this: that he was being dragged to prison! See what horrible imprecations were thrown at him, just because one voice, a single voice, had shouted “Death!” Even if the terrible game he had begun to play were to teach him nothing but that, it would have been worth all the anguish he had experienced and the annoyance he was yet to undergo. Things would now proceed in a normal manner. The amazing and paradoxical game in which the mouse would play with the cat was now to begin!

His facile irony which had come back to him for a moment when he was arrested now fell away again. The Law of the land loomed

before him now as an infinitely more complex piece of machinery than he had at first thought it to be. There stood behind him the magistrate and the judges, and that shadowy and mighty thing—the crowd.

It is true, in theory, the voice of the crowd becomes silent on the threshold of the Law Court; true, the judges are only to be guided by the witnesses of facts and by their knowledge of the Law. But what man can be strong enough, righteous enough, great enough to be totally uninfluenced by the imperious will of the people? A true criminal has almost as much to fear from the verdict of the populace as from that of the judge. Whatever may be said about it, it is, nevertheless, true that even penalties vary with public opinion. A crime punished to-day with a few months' imprisonment would have, in former times, brought its perpetrators to the gallows. Damiens, who was broken upon the wheel for having inflicted an insignificant scratch upon Louis XV, would now, in the twentieth century, have probably been condemned to about two years' imprisonment on a charge of *lèse-majesté*.

. . . . .

Once the preliminary inquiry was over, Coche was shut up into a little cell at the police-station. He could hear the policemen talking outside his door, and from time to time one looked in through the grating.

Towards twelve o'clock they came to ask about his dinner. Was he hungry? He said "Yes." In reality he had a lump in his throat, and the mere thought of eating made him feel ill. Nevertheless, as he did not want to appear too upset, he ordered his own dinner from the bill of fare of a neighbouring restaurant, pretending to choose what he liked best.

They brought him his meat all cut up and his vegetables in little coarse, heavy plates, which had been so often washed and knocked about that they were cracked here and there, and the greasy water seemed to spread inside the cracks, leaving yellowish-grey spots. His attempts to swallow even one mouthful proved futile, but he eagerly drank both his bottles of wine and water and then began to walk up and down his cell, seized by a great desire for movement, air, and freedom. Except for the handcuffs, which had been put on rather too

tightly, he had not been ill-treated. He had expected to find the policemen more rough and brutal, and he had been prepared to assert in his favour the rights of an innocent man who must be treated as such until the courts have found him guilty. He had, above all, imagined that he himself would behave quite differently from what he had done.

During the last few days, when he thought of his probable frame of mind after the arrest, he had always thought that he would preserve his vigour and cheerfulness. But a few hours' imprisonment had sufficed to change this idea. He began to realise, little by little, the exceptional seriousness of the thing he had done, and even before having had any experience of the procedure of the law, he now stood in fear of all that surrounded him. True, there was always one reassuring thought at the back of his mind:

"When I have had enough of it, I shall put a stop to the play, and that's all."

As the day began to wane, his thoughts took a sadder turn. Nothing evokes more vividly the sweet remembrance of home—of one's own



snug room with its cheerful fire, the white cloth shining with its silver and glass, and the comfort of the well-loved house—than the treacherous chilliness which invades, at night-fall, dark rooms where all the sounds of the street only find a stifled echo. In the lobby the policemen on duty had lighted a lamp and seated themselves round a table, and there was a smell of paraffin mixed with the musty odour of wet cloth and leather which had tormented him since the morning. Yet he could not hold back, and, standing on tiptoe, he looked eagerly through the little grating at those peaceful men leaning over the table in tired attitudes—and above all he looked at the lamp—a hideous thing with a broken shade dotted with red—yet which gave a little of that light which he missed so dreadfully in his cell.

About six o'clock somebody opened the door. He thought they were going to examine him, but a policeman only handcuffed him again and pushed him out into the lobby. There he found two ragged-looking men, a pale young black-guard who smoked a cigarette with a half-sneer on his lips, and two women who reminded

him of the one he had seen that night on the Boulevard Lannes. A police inspector made the prisoners pass before him, counting them; then, one by one, he made them get into a prison van that stood before the door. Coche was the last, and he heard one of the policemen inside telling the inspector, pointing at him:

“You’d better keep an eye on that one.”

There was only one step from the door to the van, and Coche involuntarily turned away his head so as not to meet the eyes of the loafers.

As his hands were bound he had to be helped to get up. They put him into the last box. He sat down; there was not room for his knees. They closed the door after him, and the vehicle, drawn by two old horses, started off at a trot, jolting along the cobbled street.

This was the real beginning of the ordeal, and it felt pretty stiff. But what joy he would feel in “doing” magistrates and police, in catching them in the act of flagrant error or partiality and in getting out of them, without their being aware of it for a moment, those unique interviews by which he would be known

as the foremost among ingenious and brilliant journalists. . . .

He kept repeating this to himself rather to keep up his courage than out of real conviction; yet he hoped, it is true, to regain his cheerfulness and his clearness of thought after a night's rest.

He was deposited that night in a city prison. The next day and the day after he only saw his keepers. Although he felt oppressed by the solitude, yet at first his anguish of mind was less than it had been when he was walking freely about Paris.

He spent the whole day on his bed; at night he slept well enough, only inconvenienced by the light of the electric lamp placed exactly above his head.

Then the constant vigilance exercised over him began gradually to irritate him. After having dreaded solitude, he now wished that his could be complete. The thought that all his movements were watched, his every gesture spied upon, maddened him, and a nervous dread, dim at first, but increasing from hour to hour, grew upon him:

.

Why? What clue had they had for arresting him?

Of course he had some idea of it, but so far nobody had told him formally; so that he found himself in confinement without knowing officially the reason of his arrest. What if he were accused of some other crime? He could remember a score of stories of people condemned to hard labour and discovered afterwards to have been innocent. He felt sufficiently strong to defend himself against an accusation for which he himself had made the data; but not against any indictment that chance alone might have brought against him.

When he had succeeded in laying his mind more or less at rest upon this point, he began to wonder about something else:

How had they managed to take him so quickly? What indiscretion had he committed to put the Police on his track? What had they found to fix their suspicions directly upon himself? All that he had purposely done in the room of the crime—the cuff-link he had left there and the bits of envelope—were destined to strengthen and to favour suspicions already

awakened; but he could discover nothing in his attitude to explain why they had begun to look in his direction at all.

He wondered whether he had not been swayed from the very start by some unknown force, whether he had not been followed, say, on the night of the crime.

He tried to remember all the faces he had seen in the street, at the restaurant, in the hotel. None answered to the idea which he formed to himself of the mysterious being who for four days, he thought, must have shadowed him. And here, again, it was the unknown which frightened him.

From seeming to him quite unlikely, this idea became possible; from possible it grew probable; then certain. . . .

“And so,” thought he, “I have lived for days in the company of some being who has not left me, whose eyes have followed me, whose will has perhaps determined every gesture of mine! . . . Who knows?—Perhaps this same being was my master before ever I entered the house of the murder. . . . And what if it was he who suggested to me the very idea of the part which

I have acted and am acting still? That would mean that I am entirely in his power, that I am his tool; that he dictates my actions and my words. . . . Through the walls of my prison he would be substituting his will for mine, and I, living, acting, thinking, would be no more than a puppet with a human shape and with the *appearance* of life, the *appearance* of a will. . . . Then, if he should choose, to-morrow or in an hour's time, to make me fall under the accusation of this crime of which I am innocent, and to cancel from my memory the details of that night . . . I would still obey."

His excitement increased at every moment. He would then begin to write in an agitated manner, putting down the least details of his life, reading it over, to be sure that there was a logical sequence in it, and that what he read was really dictated by *his own thought*.

He had always had a certain fear of the incomprehensible; he had never succeeded in really disbelieving in spirits, or dared to deny their power, their immaterial presence in the world of the living, their intervention in the existence of mortals. Although he was no

spiritualist, he had never had the courage to laugh at table-turning, and every time he had heard the mysterious little knocks of the table speaking, he had felt the same violent emotion, and shivered under the same doubt.

All his present surmises, far from exciting in him a natural and healthy revolt against unlawful trickery, reduced him to a perfectly amazing state of feebleness. He said to himself: "If all that is now happening to me has really been willed only by myself, I shall know how to loose the knot that I have tied and how to unravel the skein that my hands alone have played with; but, if I am only the agent of a superior will, only the tool in the hands of another, then anything that I may now desire will be of no avail, for I shall still be unable to attempt anything that has not been dictated to me by one whom I cannot refuse to obey. . . ."

He soon seemed to live only in a dream and become insensible to everything, waiting with oriental patience and fatalism for events to embody his fears. Thus a strange apathy came over him, and the third day, when he got into

a van to be taken before the Examining Magistrate, he adopted such a meek attitude that those who watched him thought that isolation had overpowered his will, and that before a quarter of an hour elapsed he would have confessed all.



## IX

### ANGUISH

**I**N fiction the Examining Magistrate is always portrayed with a thin face, drawn lips, and a threatening gleam in his eye. According to some, his glance has a mysterious power of fascination like that of great birds of prey. By common consent he is the first and most serious enemy of the accused. Although by law prisoners are now protected from his caprice or his prejudice or from any arbitrary decree, yet he is the master of their honour, their freedom, and their life. Cynical and crafty, he evades the law without actually going against it. He has now lost the right to isolate the accused or to question him except in the presence of his lawyer; but he circumvents these regulations by postponing the day of the examination and asking innocent-sound-

ing questions so as not to arouse his suspicions; and if by chance the man guesses that something is wrong and refuses to speak out of the presence of his protector, the magistrate grants his application and then proceeds to question him in such a manner that his lawyer can be of no assistance to him.

Onesimus Coche was aware of all this, and it was for the very purpose of being able to give a detailed and accurate account of the facts that he had got himself into his present plight.

Now, his judge was a dapper little man, with a roundish face and kind little eyes that seemed to blink behind his glasses. He made the journalist sit down before him and began turning over his papers, glancing at him surreptitiously now and then. His manner exasperated the already overwrought nerves of Coche, and he began to drum with his fingers on the brim of his hat.

A man may hide his thoughts, he may lie with his eyes, he may preserve, in spite of everything, such a generally impassive demeanour that not one of his muscles moves;

he may even control his blushing or growing pale, but his hands know not how to lie—they cannot deceive.

Our hands scarcely belong to us; our will becomes ineffectual there; our intelligent, foolish, coaxing or brutal hands are traitors that we carry with us. And the judge did not take his eyes off the hands of Coche. When he saw them quiver, he thought to himself that the moment for the first blow was coming near; when he saw them contract he raised his head and began his examination by the few indispensable formal questions: name, age, profession, etc.; then he continued his investigation of the papers, whilst Coche, more and more unnerved, clutched his knees convulsively. Then, deeming that the psychological moment had come at last, the magistrate spoke out without further preamble:

“Will you explain to me why you suddenly disappeared from your house, and how it came about that you were found three days ago in an hotel of bad repute in the Avenue d’Orleans?”

Coche had expected quite a different begin-

ning, and his voice did not sound half as firm as he could have wished when he replied:

"I should like first of all to know for what reason I am here."

"You are here because you have murdered Monsieur Forget, Boulevard Lannes."

Coche breathed more freely. Until that minute he had not been able to forget his first fear, unlikely though it seemed, that he might be accused of some other crime. He therefore replied, in a tone of surprise—too long prepared, however, to sound spontaneous:

"What an idea! Really this is beyond a joke."

After an interval he added: "And if I understand your words aright, you imply not that I am accused of this crime, but that I am convicted of it."

"It is quite a pleasure to talk with you," sneered the magistrate. "Nothing is lost upon you."

"You are too kind, sir. But even out of gratitude for your politeness I find it impossible to confess to a crime which I have not committed."

"I will repeat my first question; you shall answer it, and if you prove yourself to be innocent, I will give you your freedom on the spot."

"Ah," thought Coche to himself, "you're really playing too well into my hands. That's a good one for the beginning of my article!" And, weighing every word, he replied:

"Excuse me, but there should not be this inversion of parts: it is not for me to prove that I am innocent, but for you to prove me guilty. Once that is admitted and settled, I shall be delighted to answer any question you may choose to ask, provided it is in no sense prejudicial to the tranquillity or the honour of any third party."

"This is a novel and simple manner of defence. You give me to understand that there are things which you are not able to say—things no doubt of prime importance?"

"I imply nothing at all. I say that I make two reservations, on principle: you interpret the second at your will, and I will remind you of the first; namely, that I will only speak

under certain conditions, as, for instance, in the presence of my lawyer."

"That is only natural, and I was just about to invite you to choose your counsel for the defence. We will continue our inquiry another day."

"But I am anxious, on the contrary, for my examination to proceed at once. If your clerk or a policeman will be kind enough to go into the lobby and bring back the first lawyer he comes across, even if he has never held a brief in his life, I shall be perfectly content. If I were guilty, I should try to get a shining light of the bar to defend my cause; being innocent, I wish to set up a defence merely because the law requires this formality, and simply because I am obedient to the law."

The man came back after a moment, bringing a young lawyer with him.

"I thank you, sir, for having the kindness to assist me. In point of fact, I imagine that matters will proceed very quickly. Now, sir"—to the magistrate—"I am entirely at your service."

"Then I will repeat my first question. Why

did you suddenly disappear from your house, and how is it that you were found three days ago in an hotel of bad repute in the Avenue d'Orleans?"

"I left my house because I wished to be away for a time, and I slept in the Avenue d'Orleans because I found myself by chance near the hotel at too late an hour to return to Paris that night."

"Where were you coming from?"

"Really, I can't remember. . . ."

"I can tell you, though. You were coming from your rooms at 16, Rue de Douai. . . ."

"What . . . ?" stammered out Coche in amazement.

"Yes, indeed, from your rooms, where you had changed your clothes and tried to recover a link which, in other hands than your own, might prove compromising for you in the future. You did not find that link. It was not very far, however, for here it is. . . . Do you know it?"

"Yes," murmured Coche, truly frightened this time, at the swiftness and deftness with which he had been caught.

“Would you tell me now where you lost the other one?”

“I don’t know.”

“‘I don’t know, I don’t know’—always the same answer! A moment ago you said, ‘It is for you to prove my guilt and not for me to establish my innocence.’ There is a limit to everything! Yet once again I will answer for you: you lost the other cuff-link in the room where Forget was murdered. . . . It was found there. . . .”

“There is nothing surprising in that. I went in with the Police Commissioner; I expect my link broke and fell then.”

“Just so; but as you wore a flannel shirt with buttons, instead of links, your explanation won’t hold water. Besides, it is the custom, when one puts a link in one cuff, to put the pair to it in the other cuff. Now, I repeat to you, one of these links was left in your evening shirt, and your charwoman found it there.”

“I can’t make out . . .”

“Neither can I, or, rather, I see it all only too clearly.”



"Then, sir, on the strength of a chance clue you conclude that I am guilty! It surely isn't possible."

"A chance clue, indeed! *I* call it a piece of circumstantial evidence, and a most serious one; but I have other clues as well. What could you say to explain a letter, dropped by yourself in the room of the crime? Another chance clue, is it?"

"I cannot have dropped any letters on the site of the crime, for the excellent reason that I went there, as I have already said, with the Police Commissioner, and did not stop more than three minutes, and . . ."

"Come here. There, Counsel. Look at these pieces of paper; taken haphazard, they mean nothing at all; but put them like this, and what do you see?—'Monsieur . . . esi . . . 22 ue de . . . E. V.', which I interpret by supplying the missing letters, and reading: 'Monsieur Onesimus . . . 22 Rue de . . . E. V.' You will agree, sir, that your Christian name is not so common that it is unjustifiable to couple it with your surname, although I will own that

the latter is not there. That gives me 'Monsieur Onesimus Coche, 22, Rue de . . .'

"Oh, no, no, no! I protest with all my might against such a method of deduction. Out of a few scattered letters, you make up my Christian name, then you deliberately add my surname. Even from your own way of looking at it, the next part of what you read there destroys all the conclusions that you might arrive at from the beginning. You have 22, Rue de . . . Rue de—what, first of all? And, besides, I have never lived at No. 22. Since you know so much about my having returned home, you surely know that. I desire my protest to be inserted in the official report."

And to himself he thought:

"There's a little piece of ingenuity that you shall pay for pretty dearly when I get out of prison! I am most certainly getting plenty of 'copy.'"

"Your protest shall be inserted; have no fear. But we will add to it this trifling observation: examine the back of these bits of paper and fragments of writing—you are looking? You may read—and it is written in full this

time—‘Unknown No. 22, try 16.’ You live at 16, Rue de Douai. This letter, addressed by mistake to No. 22, was delivered at your house, and it is not the first time that there has been some confusion about the number of your address. You see how, when I assert that this letter belongs to you, I am not being carried away by purely imaginary deductions. Now, if you have anything to say I will listen to you. . . .”

Coche bent his head. When he tore up his envelope, he had not thought of the postman’s correction on the back, and he now saw quite clearly that the judge had already made up his mind about his case. He therefore was content with replying:

“I don’t know; I cannot understand. What I can assert and swear to you is that I am innocent, that I did not know the victim, had never seen him at all, and, finally, that the whole of my past life gives the lie to such an accusation.”

“I don’t deny that,” said the magistrate, “but this will do for to-day. Now the report

of your examination shall be read over to you, and you will kindly sign it."

Coche scarcely listened to the reading; then he signed the document. He held out his hands automatically to the policeman who was to handcuff him, and went out.

In the corridor his lawyer said to him:

"I will come and see you to-morrow morning; we must have a long talk."

"Thank you," said Coche.

And he immediately followed his guide along narrow corridors, leading to the exit of the police-court.

Once alone in his little cell, he began to think deeply. How far he was from feeling like the adventurous reporter, with ready repartee, resourceful and willing, if necessary, to play for the highest stakes with a cheerful countenance! He was now beginning to feel sorry that he had started this game—not that he entertained the slightest uneasiness concerning the final result. He knew that with a single word he could reduce all the accusations to nothingness. But nevertheless he felt the menacing circle closing in upon him, and, once his finger was

caught in the imposing machinery of the law, he understood that he would have to make a huge effort not to have his whole arm dragged in too. He had pictured himself cunningly worrying the police, convincing them of clumsiness and indiscretion; he now found that he had accumulated such proofs against himself that the least prejudiced of men would not have hesitated on seeing him to say:

“There goes the culprit!”

The magistrate's opinion of him was, after all, so natural as to be almost inevitable. What had his own replies been? Nothing. He had proclaimed his innocence; and what else? The “accent of truth,” you may say? It is about as easily distinguishable as “thickness of blood” in members of the same family. Take an habitual liar, for instance; he will only look as if he were lying when he is speaking the truth. . . . His dread of the unknown was added to his other causes for fear. What new indictment would the judge now bring against him? He had not known what to reply when questions were put to him, two of which at least he expected; what would be his attitude

before an accusation that he did not expect? Denial, blank denial in the face of any amount of evidence, in the face of every appearance of truth: such must be his defence. As for causing the slightest shadow of a doubt in the mind of the judge, that was a thing no longer to be even dreamt of. Yet—and this was the only thing that he could rely upon to create uneasiness in the mind of his jury—when the consideration of motives came before the court his position would be invulnerable. The inquiry would reveal the fact that he did not even know of the existence of this Forget, and that none of his associates had even heard the man's name. Now would it be possible for a man, whose past is irreproachable, to be detained in prison under suspicion when no motive could be discovered for his crime?

Next day his lawyer came for an interview. He first put vague questions to him relating to the events of his past life, his acquaintances, his personal habits. He asked for exact information about some insignificant details without daring to broach the subject of the crime openly. After about a quarter of an

hour's talk, Coche, who was growing more and more unstrung, said to him:

"Come, sir, tell me the truth. You think that I'm guilty. . . ."

The lawyer stopped him with a gesture.

"Do not continue, I entreat you. I hold your protestations of innocence to be sincere and true; you understand?—true. However weighty are the clues which have been found against you, I insist upon seeing in them no more than the effect of a terrible caprice of fate. Your defence is that you are innocent. And I proclaim your innocence."

"But I swear to you, sir, I swear to you upon all that I hold dearest in the world—I *am* innocent!"

At that moment Coche was seized with a mad temptation to tell this man the whole story. But what lawyer would have dared to take his defence after such a confession? He had condemned himself to the only possible course of action, namely, complete denial without any regard to probabilities.

Still, he did want his lawyer to believe in his sincerity. He went on passionately:

"I am innocent, I am INNOCENT! Presently, very soon, perhaps, you will see; I will tell you . . ."

"But I believe you—I assure you I do."

And Coche understood by his whole attitude and demeanour that his lawyer was concealing his thoughts, and that he too was convinced of Coche's guilt. They went on talking a little while, gently, scarcely mentioning the crime at all. Coche was almost beginning to forget that there was anything grotesque and dramatic in his present situation, and the lawyer was trying to fathom what there could be at the back of the cool bravado which seemed now to replace the extraordinarily well-acted indignation with which he had begun.

During the afternoon of the next day the accused was fetched out of his cell and led again to the prison van. He thought that he was going to be taken again to the court, but the way seemed longer than on his previous journey. Craning his neck a little, he tried to see through the ventilators, but the bars of wood were placed aslant, and in the opposite direc-



tion from the usual one, so that he could only see a sad little strip of cold grey sky. At last the van stopped. He got down, and they hurried him along—not quickly enough, however, to prevent his seeing the Seine that flowed past heavily, tinged with mud; and he realised that he was at the Morgue.

“Ah, the whole thing has to be gone through,” he thought. “I am to be confronted with the body!”

The thought of a sight, the mere mention of which fills the true criminal with a sense of fear, did not trouble him greatly. What threat could the darkened eyes of this poor dead man convey to him? He could look fearlessly upon the poor body which he had already seen twice: in the night, when the pulses had barely ceased beating, and again on the following morning, stiff and cold. Nevertheless, when he found himself in the hall, with its white walls and its high windows, and with pale patches caused by shafts of light upon the marble tables, he experienced a sensation of recoil. A faint odour of disinfectant, made of carbolic and essence of thyme—an odour that was a cross

between that of a pharmacy and of a burial ground—filled the clammy air; and he thought he could distinguish the terrible musty smell of bodies after death. Yet he looked around him eagerly, trying to fix every least detail in his memory so as to be able, very soon, to enumerate them all in his journalistic *chef-d'œuvre*.

He was at last taken into a room where a human body, covered with a sheet, lay stretched upon a table. They took off the sheet, and although he was prepared for the sight, he drew back involuntarily. He did not seem to recognise that body—at least, at first sight he did not. Death, completing its work, had beaten down the flesh and made it shrink. The face which he had seen full and round was now emaciated with grey-green shadows, from the temples to the chin, as if some inhuman creature had delighted in modelling the yellow wax of that face.

After he had looked for a few seconds, the magistrate said to him:

“This is your victim.”

“Once more I protest against your horrible

accusation. I do not know this man; I never knew him."

And he thought within himself: "To think that the real truth of it all has passed before these eyes, and that now all is over; so surely is nothing left of what this being saw and suffered that night, that they might behead me here without a shiver passing over this inert body. . . ."

The ordeal was very short. From the point of view of the magistrates, Coche was still obstinate in his denial, and would continue so to the end—he was one of the sort that do not yield.

They tried to wear him out by sapping his courage: even that was in vain. The accused invariably replied to every question:

"I know nothing."

When, after heaping up charge upon charge, they asked him:

"What can you answer to this? How can you explain that?" he would raise his arms and only murmur:

"I don't understand! I cannot make out . . ."

The long and difficult examination brought

to light no interesting fact. It was impossible to pierce the wall of mystery which had surrounded Forget during his life. No one knew him or his habits. There was no moral presumption that could be brought to tell against Coche, but for that very reason it was easier to attribute all to him. From the fact that no one knew who were the friends of the victim they simply concluded that it was perfectly possible for Coche to have had relations with him without any one being able to witness to the fact. As for the motive of this harrowing crime, none could clearly be seen. A minute investigation of the life of Coche and of his resources resulted only in their learning that he did not live in clover, but that he paid his rent regularly, and that he was not known to have any serious love affair. It was found impossible to make up any list of the articles stolen from the Boulevard Lannes, and Chance—which it was hoped might throw some light upon the subject—did not favour their investigations. Indeed, at the end of three months, notwithstanding all the zeal of the Police, the tenacity of the judge, and the private and in-

dependent researches of all the newspapers in Paris, the results of the investigations stood exactly where they stood the first day; namely, that there were two clear and incriminating pieces of evidence against Onesimus Coche: the bit of envelope and the cuff-link picked up in the room of the victim. From these discoveries had sprung a presumption of his guilt which he had never been able to disprove. A further serious cause for suspicion lay in the fact of his sudden departure from the *World* and his flight across Paris, where he had been traced for three days in three different hotels under false names. Add to this his strange attitude at the moment of his arrest, his attempt at armed defence against the Police, his night visit to his own house—and one was confronted by a case clear enough to authorise every suspicion and almost every certainty of his guilt. The prosecution, it is true, could find no indication of motive, but circumstantial evidence took its place; so the investigation was closed, and the affair of the Boulevard Lannes was entered among the cases for hearing at the spring sessions of the criminal court.

## X

### IN THE CLUTCHES OF DEATH

**H**IS long imprisonment had told greatly upon Coche. From being unstrung, as he was during the first days, he had sunk into a state of permanent depression. At the beginning he could, after all, have confessed the whole thing; now it seemed to him impossible, after so many small untruths. He was waiting for the opportunity to come to him. Surely some event, some unexpected incident, would occur to provide this opportunity! But day after day went by and no incident arose. Worse than that—and this was a cause of great annoyance to Coche—nothing sensational occurred during his imprisonment, any more than it had done during the unravelling of his case. He would almost have enjoyed some cause for protest against injustice, or brutality, or

breach of the laws; but everything went on in the most natural manner. Without overdoing it in tenderness, his jailers proved humane, rather gentle; so much so that he began to ask himself:

“What shall I be able to tell when I get out of here?”

At intervals that gruesome idea came back to him of a mysterious being having *made* him embark upon this business; then he was again seized by fear, by a harrowing sense of the inexplicable and the unknown, and he remained for the whole day prostrate upon his bed and shaken by such violent shudders that he was often asked if he were ill.

One morning the doctor had come and Coche had refused to answer any of his questions, only saying this:

“The illness I am suffering from is one which you can neither cure nor alleviate. I am not mad, and I am not pretending to be mad. I only want to be left alone.”

He would not speak to any one. He scarcely listened, even to his lawyer. He was overcome by intense sadness, and at times by

strange excitability; the thought that he was the puppet of supernatural agencies had come and gone, and come again so often that to his mind it had now become a certainty.

He still tried to fight against it. One day, unable to stand the thing any longer, feeling his mind give way and his power of reasoning fail him, he got up suddenly and decided to put an end to this terrible comedy, to confess everything and bear any pain or humiliation, if only he could see the daylight again, the vast sky and palpitating life around him, if only he could be convinced, once and forever, that he still was the arbiter of his own acts, the master of his own will. He flung himself towards the door and called the jailer. But when the jailer came, he stammered brokenly:

"I called you. . . . I wanted to tell you. . . . No . . . it's not worth the trouble . . . it was just a thought which crossed my mind. . . ."

He had been suddenly seized with a conviction that he would not be able to speak, that "they" had condemned him to silence. One word would suffice to save him; he alone



could speak that word; but he could not speak it, for "they" willed him not to.

From the very start Coche had but one enemy: his own imagination. He was a prisoner to nought save to his own abnormal weakness; and this last effort—the supreme attempt he had made to tear himself away from what he thought was a diabolical possession—had only ended in proving to him, indisputably this time, that he could take no decision except with the concurrence of that occult power, of that mysterious will which acted upon his own.

Maniacs who after a crisis regain sufficient balance of mind to be aware of their madness, and to fear the attack which may seize them again at any moment, are the most unhappy of beings. Can there be any worse torture than that of saying to oneself: "Presently my reason will give way. Perhaps some horrible instinct now dormant within me will make a monster of me. . . ."?

Like such maniacs, Coche felt sure that he could not escape this mysterious force. As soon as he wished to tell what he had done, his thought was choked back as the voice is

choked in one's throat by too violent an emotion. He saw before his eyes, he read within his brain, the words which he must say, the words of deliverance that would put an end to his nightmare—but he *could not* pronounce these words, he *could not* speak that sentence. And yet, when he was alone, huddled up in his bed, with his face hidden between his hands, he said again and again:

“At the hour when the crime was committed I was in the house of my friend, Monsieur Ledoux, and it was when I came out of his house that the idea of this grim comedy took possession of me.”

As he said this sentence to himself he was conscious of all the different inflexions in his voice. But as soon as he found himself in the presence of any one else his lips refused to speak the words which flashed in his mind, and he became an impotent witness of the slow agony of his own will.

He was in this state of mind when the spring sessions began.

This case, with its impenetrable mystery, had kept the public of Paris at a white heat

of excitement for the last three months, and Coche had both ardent partisans and fierce enemies.

Since the lengthy and careful investigation had brought to light no motive for the crime, his adversaries were divided into two classes: one thought him mad, and the other held him to be a common assassin; all the famous lunacy specialists of Paris had been consulted by turns; none had dared to give an opinion. If one man asserted that Coche was guilty, those who proclaimed his innocence would reply:

“Remember the case of Lesurque, the Lyons courier.”

So, on the opening day of this case, the court presented a spectacle of extraordinary animation. The public had come, as people crowd to a play, as much to be seen as to see; the ladies, who were in a majority, had donned new dresses for the occasion. There was a dense crowd in the part reserved for the public, and in answer to countless applications the President had had three rows of chairs put on the dais. The room felt stiflingly hot. The light, falling too crudely from the high win-

dows, made violent contrasts of light and shade upon the faces of those present, and the whispers of the crowd soon grew to a loud murmur, interspersed with exclamations and stifled bursts of laughter.

An usher cried:

“Silence in court!”

There was a sound of chairs being pushed back and a shuffling of feet; you could hear the tag-ends of sentences, begun almost aloud, being finished now quickly and in a whisper; then a few nervous coughs, one or two voices saying “Hush!” and then a deep and solemn silence. The judge ordered the accused to be brought in, and the crowd pressed so hard that one or two people cried out, and a young woman, sitting on a barrier, lost her balance and fell.

Onesimus Coche came in. He was exceedingly pale, but his manner was neither aggressive nor cowardly. When the door opened before him, he said to himself once more:

“I shall speak; I *will* speak!”

Then his eyes scanned the crowd, but he saw no friendly face there, only a fierce curiosity,—

the unhealthy curiosity of people who have come to look on, and listen to, suffering, just as they go to a menagerie with a hope of seeing the wild animals attack and perhaps destroy their keeper. Yet he felt no revolt; he had not even any thought of hatred.

There comes a moment when moral torture and physical exhaustion are such that one has, it seems, no strength left even to suffer. Every being has a given capacity for pain; when he has reached its limit, he becomes insensible. Coche thought that his pain had reached its limit, and he was almost glad. If, on the evening when he had telephoned the great piece of news to the *World*, somebody had shown him that hall and said to him, "This is the excitement that you will succeed in creating," he would have started with joy. Now he was only conscious of an immense fatigue and a kind of dull stupor which nothing could break. Fate had crossed his life and was heavy upon him. The hour of vain rebellion had passed. He could only now submit and wait.

After he had clearly spoken his name, told his age, and given the necessary information

concerning his position and employment, he sat down to hear the text of his impeachment. This document, with all the proofs that it accumulated against him, produced the effect of a terrible hostile summing-up. As the accusations were one by one brought to a head, he understood how the judge's conviction had been built up irresistibly. In spite of it all, he said to himself:

"If I but speak I can destroy all that. Shall I be able to speak?"

The cross-examination brought no fresh light on any point. The public had hoped for sensational disclosures, believing in certain papers which had affirmed "on the best authority" that the prisoner reserved his defence for the public trial. But at every question Coche replied invariably in the same manner:

"I don't know; I cannot understand. I am innocent."

When the judge explained to him how dangerous this manner of defence really was, he gave a slow shrug of the shoulders and murmured:

"What can I do? I have nothing else to say."

And he resumed his impassive, almost indifferent attitude.

He displayed greater interest, however, when it was time to call the witnesses. His glance, vague and far away till then, became alert and keen; he leaned his chin on his hand and his elbow on his knee, and listened.

First came Monsieur Avyot, the sub-editor of the *World*. He told how Coche had left the paper after having been for a few hours in charge of this affair. When the President asked him whether, at any moment during the night of the 13th, he thought he had recognised the voice which had called him to the telephone, he replied, without hesitation, "No." Then he added a few details—the sum of money that the reporter had been given in lieu of notice; the hour at which he had seen him for the last time; his impression of Coche's manner on that occasion.

But all this was of merely secondary importance.

Next came the charwoman, who told what

she knew of her former master, of his habits and his friends. Without omitting the least detail, she told how she had found the shirt spotted with blood, and the cuff torn, and the gold and turquoise link missing; the whole thing, she said, had looked suspicious to her from the beginning, and, were it not that "servants must not mix themselves up with their masters' business," she would have communicated her suspicions to the Police long before "the gentleman from the police-station" questioned her.

After her came boys from the newspaper office; the jeweller who had originally sold the links; the postman who had left two or three letters addressed to Coche at No. 22—they all passed before the court without giving the slightest detail of real interest.

The medical officer delivered a speech full of scientific terms, numbers, and calculations, proving that death had been caused by a knife-thrust which, "starting from the sterno-cleido-mastoid, had cut through the parotid gland, severed obliquely the parotid artery, the cut running downwards and forwards, and then,



turning at the angle of the maxilla and passing again through the sterno-cleido-mastoid, had only stopped at the point where the clavicle joins the sternum."

One more witness only was left—the watchmaker employed by the prosecution to examine the clock which had been found lying sideways on the dressing-table in the room of the crime. He made his deposition amid general indifference. Coche alone did not lose a word of what he said. His evidence was clear and concise:

"The clock which I have examined," he said, "is an old make, but very good and in excellent condition—in fact, more solid and more beautifully finished than any to be found now on the market. The hands had stopped at 12.20. Clocks of this make want winding once a week, and this one had still forty-eight hours to run; therefore it did not stop through the spring being slack, but simply because it was knocked over and the pendulum could not work. When I stood it up in its proper position, a very slight touch started the motion again. I therefore conclude that the hands of the clock

marked the exact moment when the clock was overturned."

"So that would be the hour of the crime?" said the judge, rather absent-mindedly.

There were no more witnesses to be called. Now came a short interval, and then the Public Prosecutor got up to make his speech. Coche, somewhat reassured by the clear statement of the watchmaker, listened to his indictment without apparent emotion, although most of the witnesses' statements told terribly against him—dry, almost mathematically accurate, as they were.

The public, already favourably impressed for the prosecution by the cross-examination and the depositions of the various witnesses, were heard two or three times to murmur approval, and there was considerable clapping, quickly stopped by the officials, when the Public Prosecutor closed his speech with a demand that this journalist, who had neither the extenuating circumstances of poverty nor of provocation, should be sentenced to capital punishment. A shudder ran through Coche's frame, and he clenched his fists tightly. Yet

to all appearances he remained impassive. His chief thought, his only thought, was this:

"I *must* speak; I *will* speak! I WILL!"

And he repeated in an undertone to himself:

"I will! I will! I will! . . ."

During the whole speech for the defence, Coche, staring, with clenched fists, absorbed in his own thoughts, kept repeating to himself:

"I *will* speak, I WILL!"

The lawyer sat down amid the deepest silence. Out of mere courtesy Coche leaned over towards him and thanked him, but he had not heard a word of his defence, which had been a pitiable one, for the case seemed hopeless.

The trial was about to conclude. The judge turned towards the accused and said to him:

"Have you anything to add in your defence?"

Coche got up, rigid with his terrible effort; so pale that those around him thought he was about to fall, and that the policemen who were by his side put out their arms to support him. But he waved them away, and in a loud voice,

which sent a shudder through the jury and all those present, he replied:

"I have this to say, Monsieur le President; I am innocent, and I will prove it." He took a deep breath, and for a fraction of a second was silent. His eyes stared fixedly; he opened his mouth; those who were nearest to him thought they heard him murmur: "*I will, I am my own master!*" and then, all in one breath, raising his hand, with his fingers apart as if to repel a threatening vision, he cried out, rather than said:

"At 12.20, the time when the crime was being committed, I, who am innocent, was in the house of my friend, Monsieur Ledoux, 14, Rue du Général-Appert!"

And, overcome by the effort he had made, frightened by the victory which he had obtained over the mysterious Unknown, whose will had baffled his own up to this very minute, he fell heavily back on his seat, sobbing from exhaustion, reaction, and joy.

All those present had risen to their feet. There was such an uproar that the judge threatened to have every one ejected. At last,

when comparative order had been restored, he said:

“Coche, do not try to deceive us any further. Think of the consequences of your declaration if it is found to be untrue. Think well before you play that card.”

“I have thought, I have thought; I can swear that I have spoken the truth. Let my friend, Monsieur Ledoux, be sent for.”

“Sir,” said Coche’s lawyer, addressing the judge, “I request that the witness be called immediately.”

“Such indeed is my intention. In virtue of my discretionary powers, I command that the witness called by the prisoner be brought instantly before the court. Usher, please send to Monsieur Ledoux, 14, Rue du Général-Appert, and bring him here. The hearing is adjourned.”

Coche’s declaration had produced unbounded amazement. The few partisans who had taken his side among the audience were triumphant; the others, without being able to deny the decisive importance of such an alibi, still doubted its truthfulness. Especially among

the jury the sensation had been extraordinary. The jury had already made up their minds during the indictment, and they had scarcely even listened to the pleading of the Counsel for defence. If Coche's alibi were proved, the whole case against him fell to the ground, or at least received a terrible blow. As for his advocate, he was saying to Coche: "But why did you not speak sooner?" and Coche replied with the improbable but true statement:

"Because I could not."

During the next hour the court and the corridors near it presented a scene of great animation. This trial, which from its beginning had disappointed so many people by its utterly commonplace character, had suddenly become more wildly exciting than ever. When the bell was heard, every one rushed back to the court. Some who had not been able to enter that morning found a place now among the crowd of those who had obtained special permits. It was no longer possible to maintain order. The officials, overpowered, had to let everybody pass. At last all talk ceased, and

the judge came in again and gave orders for the witness to appear.

Then, amid awe-inspiring silence, a police-officer advanced alone to the bar, saluted, clapping his heels together, and said:

"At No. 14, Rue du Général-Appert, I have just heard that Monsieur Ledoux, no profession, died upon the 15th of March."

Coche stood up, livid, put his hands to his head, gave a cry, and fell like a dead man.

The Public Prosecutor had already risen to his feet.

"Gentlemen," he said, addressing the jury, "I need not emphasise the importance of the statement you have heard. Even if Monsieur Ledoux had borne his witness here, the indictment would not have lost its force; but you cannot now allow yourselves to be influenced by this daring attempt to prove an alibi, by which it has been sought to disturb your consciences. I will add nothing to my previous speech; I withdraw nothing from it. You must judge, and pitilessly condemn."

Coche's lawyer turned to the judge and exclaimed:

"Sir!"

But Coche put his hands upon the lawyer's shoulder and faltered:

"For pity's sake . . . counsel . . . not a word more. . . . It's all over . . . I beg you . . . it is all over . . . all over . . . all over."

The jury, already decided against the accused before the adjournment of the hearing, did not take long over their deliberations. After ten minutes they came back. Their reply was unanimous:

"Guilty."

Coche was reduced to the powerlessness of an inanimate thing. He was now deep in the grip of Fear. His will had triumphed, but too late, over his weak superstition, and *now* he saw clearly what kind of folly he had been fighting against for three months; he saw above all that nothing but a miracle could save him now, and Fate had laid too heavy a hand upon him for him to put any trust in miracles. He knew at last the whole horror of human fear, its monstrous terror, the desperate clinging of man to life when he is about to lose it. His eyes, his poor eyes like those of a hunted ani-



mal, rested upon these people, who a moment hence would see the street again, and feel the joy of the open air and the happiness of their loved homes—of the family hearth, where the wise man comes to shelter him with his dreams, as the sailor takes shelter for his boat in the little bay where the stars dance over the waters. . . .

And while these visions crossed his bewildered spirit, a voice rose up, first like a confused murmur in his ears, then with a sound as of thunder, saying: “. . . Onesimus Coche is condemned to death!”

And then he heard, as in a dream:

“Three clear days for you to lodge your appeal.”

He felt himself being carried away, and some one shaking his hand. . . . He found himself on his bed, in his cell, without knowing how or why, and he fell into a dull, heavy sleep.

During the night he had a horrible nightmare:

He dreamt that he had just murdered the old man of the Boulevard Lannes. He groped

in the darkness and reached the door, went down the stairs, found himself in the street; outside he stopped in the cutting wind with vacant mind and feeble knees, like those of a drunken man: not a murmur, not a sound. Shuddering, he turned up his coat-collar, took a step, stopped to find his bearings in the dark night, and started on his way.

He walked slowly, mixing in his confused thoughts the horror of his crime and the dread of that body lying back, with its throat cut open and the eyelids uncovering the upturned eyes. A dark and deserted street opened before him. Trembling, with shaking knees, he leaned against the wall, and suddenly a sound of footsteps reached him in the silence. He stopped, contracting every muscle, straining his ear. The same sound came on, louder and more distinct. He then went on, slouching past the houses—on, straight before him; the sound came after him, in his wake. He ran, and the sound ran with him. . . . Now the street, wider and lined with dim lights, spread out before him silent and deserted. He sprang forward with Terror by his side like a blood-

hound. . . . A wild fire burned in his breast; he ran on and on, losing all notion of time, of the hour that was slowly dying. All that remained to him of strength and energy lived only for the promise of the pale dawn that would soon appear upon the horizon, bringing in its train the awakening of man and beast, and faces of other human beings to people this desert which filled him with such terror. And still he ran. He had taken so many turnings and crossed so many roads that he had reached an unknown place, and was lost on the outskirts of the sleeping town. He ran, gasping with fatigue and fear . . . and lo! on the horizon, the day began to break, grey and watery. . . . The day! the day! . . . Then there rose a confused murmur, as it were, the whisperings of a crowd. Down there, a great, dark mass moved like the swelling of the sea. . . . Was he still possessed by the night's delirium. No, no; there were men before him. . . . At last he would no longer be alone with his fear. . . . He would touch human beings, he would be amongst them. . . . He listened keenly. A short sound rose above the noise . . . a rustle, swift like that

of the wind among the falling leaves . . . a white light came into the lifting clouds. The anguish of the night, the horrible solitude were ended. . . . But the sea of people opened as if to make a way for him . . . he advanced; and all of a sudden he fell upon his knees: in his agony he had not seen whither his flight was leading him, and lo, now close before him rose a bewildering, bloodcurdling ghoul, with its two great arms spread out in the wan light . . . the Guillotine!

Coche woke up with a shriek. . . . For one second he experienced the joy of the awakening that dispels a nightmare. But soon the reality, more fearful still than his dream, continued the story for him.

The Guillotine! The white blade, and the basket for the severed head . . . he was to see them. He stuffed the clothes in his mouth to stifle an agonised cry. . . . Farewell, peaceful nights; tranquil days! Between all that he had loved and wished and hoped for, and him, this horrible thing (he did not even dare to *think* the word) rose now inexorably. . . .

The next day his lawyer came to see him, to

make him sign his appeal and his demand for mercy. He muttered, "What's the good!" but signed all the same. When he had put down the pen, he said, fixing his eyes, enlarged by terror and by fever, upon his defender:

"Look here . . . you must know, I must tell you. . . ."

In a halting voice, interrupting his sentence, with jerky actions and with broken words, he told the whole story of the night of the 13th: of his dinner at Ledoux', his departure, his meeting with the burglars, his visit to the house of the crime, and the sudden wish he had had to outdo the police, to simulate flight in order to attract attention. . . . He left off.

The lawyer took his hand and said gently to him:

"No, come; it isn't worth it. . . . The judge will commute your sentence to penal servitude. . . . Down there . . . you will, later on, be able to commence a fresh life. . . ."

"Ah," cried the wretched man, "then you think that I am lying? . . . but I am *not*—you hear me? . . . I am *not* lying. . . . Oh, go away! Go away! . . ."

Then, exasperated to the last degree, he threw himself upon the man, shouting:

“Go, then, go, won’t you? Can’t you see that you’re driving me mad?”

When he was left alone he was seized by a horrible access of despair. So—even the man who had taken up his defence could not believe in his innocence!—And at the same time the fear of death and of physical pain grew upon him, and he clung to life desperately. He began to tear his hair, sobbing:

“I will not die; I am innocent!”

He became gentle, timid, entreating towards all, as if the humblest of his keepers were able to influence in his favour the highest powers in the land, and so deliver him from the scaffold.

It was still worse when they took him to la Roquette. Until then he had a few seconds now and then, when he could forget the scaffold; but there—between those walls which had held only men condemned to death, like himself—the haunting thought grew clearer, the vision more distinct. All the great historic criminals had passed in a long procession through that

place. They had lain upon that same bed, and shuddered with horror at the thought of the execution drawing nearer day by day, leaning, with their elbow thus, upon this table. He was already unlike other men; he belonged to a class apart, outside the covenant of the law, almost outside that of life. They had shaved his hair and his moustache, and he did not recognise his own face when he passed his hand over it. He had almost forgotten human speech; he remembered only words that bore some relation to his approaching death, and for whole hours, huddled up in a corner of his cell, with his elbows on his knees and his face on his hands, he saw passing in endless procession before him images of terror and scenes of execution.

He saw his last night; the awakening, and the dismal square, grey under a grey sky, with damp roofs around it, and the shining pavement below. . . . But he saw, above all, the "*Widow*," with her immense red arms and the toothless laughter of her crescent with the sharp-edged blade.

The chaplain came to see him every day.

Little by little a kind of superstitious terror, a need of finding refuge in some one, of being listened to and pitied, inclined Coche towards a kind of timid religiousness, filled with superstitious visions. He spoke no longer, but listened eagerly, clasping his hands round his emaciated neck and suddenly letting go, as if he felt the spot where the knife would fall; repeating this gesture, mechanically and ceaselessly. Even with the priest he avoided any reference to his approaching end. He listened to talk of repentance, of expiation; . . . these words had no meaning for him. What crime was he to expiate? of what offence was he to repent? If God did in very truth see the actions of men, He would know the innocence of this soul when it arrived before His tribunal. . . .

One day, however, nearly the fortieth day of his captivity, when he already knew that his appeal had been rejected and that there was no hope left save possibly the mercy of the President, he suddenly said to the chaplain:

“My father, I ask you to speak the truth out of your very soul: if you were in the place of



the President, would you sign my reprieve? Be quite truthful with me. I must know. I need to know."

And the chaplain, looking him straight in the face, replied:

"No, my child; I should not sign it. One must pay. . . ."

Strange thing, this answer almost calmed him again. The worst torment of his existence was doubt. He had not dared to prepare himself to die, fearing that he would draw the fate of death upon him. Now it was all over. He considered himself as he would be after death, and thought that by this preparation he could resist better the dismay of his awakening. Nevertheless, as the fatal day drew nearer, his sleep grew crowded with nightmares. At the least sound he would sit up suddenly upon his bed and press his ear to the wall, trying to guess what was happening in the street or in the square; and when the day was come, and he was sure that it was not for "*this morning*," he fell asleep with sighs and sobs. . . .

About the close of the forty-third night he

seemed to hear a vague noise—the sound of a hammer upon wood, and muffled footsteps. His teeth began to chatter; he dared not listen; he feared to hear the sounds. His eyes, riveted upon the door of his cell, waited for the agonising moment when that door would open for the executioner to come before him. And it opened that morning.

Coche looked in a stupefied manner at the men who surrounded him, and got up without speaking a word or making a gesture. They asked him:

“Do you wish to hear Mass?”

He nodded. During the service he looked all the time at a tiny line that separated two stones in the pavement, and thought that the mark of the knife on his neck would not be wider than that. . . . The only surprise that came into what little conscious thought was left him was that of being still alive.

Then came the preparations upon his person;—but things had no longer any significance for him. He scarcely shivered at all when the scissors touched the nape of his neck, or when they put the rope on his hands and the

shackles on his feet. They offered him a cigarette and some brandy . . . he refused both. . . . And suddenly the horizon, which for nearly five months had been bounded for him by the narrow walls of his cell, grew wider; a fresh breeze blew on his face; a deep, awful silence filled his hearing—so deep, so formidably silent, that his heart beat in it like a bell. His dream of that night had come true. Over the shoulders of the priest stood the guillotine, clearly marked against the sky. . . .

The day was slowly breaking. Behind the houses the sky was shaded by a milky, rosy trail. His eyes, wide open, looked for the last time . . . looked. . . . He walked a step, and stumbled in his bonds; the men around him assisted him. The priest faltered:

“God will forgive you!”

The Public Prosecutor said to him in a shaking voice:

“Have you no confession, no revelation to make?”

Gathering all the strength that remained in him, Coche opened his lips to cry:

“I am innocent. . . .”

His knees were already touching the swing-board. He cast one last glance around. . . . And suddenly, notwithstanding those who supported him, notwithstanding his shackles and his weakness, he leaped back with a super-human cry:

“There! There! There! . . .”

And while they tried to push him, all rigid and immovable, with his feet firmly planted on the floor and his chin thrown forward, he yelled and yelled.

There was something so fierce and so harrowing in his cry that even the assistants hesitated for a minute. The chaplain followed the direction of Coche’s gesture, and from the mob below there suddenly rose loud shrieks of fear.

A soldier who was standing at attention fell backwards, and two men and a woman were seen trying to break through the crowd, which, with an irresistible rush, had violated the cordon and had invaded the empty space where the condemned man was writhing and crying:

“Arrest them! Arrest them! . . . The assassins. . . . There! . . . There! . . .”

The chaplain threw himself forward, and cried:

"The two men! . . . the woman! . . . Arrest them! Arrest them! . . ."

Twenty hands fell upon them. One of the men drew his knife; the woman began to utter piercing shrieks. The chaplain threw himself upon Coche, and, protecting him with his arms, implored the Public Prosecutor:

"In Heaven's name, don't lay hands on this man!"

Coche was now motionless. Great tears rolled down his blanched face. For a few seconds the Prosecutor and the Commissioner of Police spoke to each other in an undertone. The Commissioner said:

"I decline all responsibility. The execution cannot be proceeded with at present, sir. I have not enough men to keep down this crowd. There'll be some lynching. Consider this, I implore you."

Then the Prosecutor muttered:

". . . Take the prisoner back."

Strange inconstancy of the masses! This crowd, which had come there on purpose to

witness the death of a man, shouted with joy on seeing him delivered.

. . . . .

This is what had occurred. At the last moment, before he was thrown on to the swing-board, Coche had recognised the two men and the woman whom he had seen on the night of the crime, standing now in the first line of spectators. That second, longer for him than a century, had been enough: their features were too deeply impressed on his memory for him to hesitate in their presence; one glance had sufficed him to pick out in detail the red hair of the woman, the crooked mouth of the short man, and the face of the other one, marked by the scar which disfigured him from over the temple right down to his nostril.

What sinister thought had made them come, all three, to watch the execution of the man who was to expiate *their* crime? On the days of public execution all those for whom the scaffold is waiting come eagerly to look, as if trying to learn how to die. With these three that feeling was blended with another—with the fierce joy of impunity, and of the triumph which saved them forever. . . .

When under arrest they tried at first to deny all charges against them. But Coche had suddenly regained possession of all his presence of mind and his reasoning powers. The precision of his declaration, the details which he gave of their appearance, everything, even his description of the wound of the bigger man, made them falter and contradict one another. . . . The woman was the first to blurt out the confession; the men followed after. And the everlasting, inhuman yet dramatic scene of accomplices accusing one another was rehearsed again before men's eyes. Nearly all the stolen articles and the knife that had been used for the crime were found in the house of these people. Then the incredible adventure of Coche became clear, and after a fortnight he was set at liberty—not innocent before the eyes of the law, but forgiven until the Court of Appeal had revised his trial.

. . . . .

When Coche found himself for the first time alone and free in the street, he was almost dazed, and he began to cry.

The early spring filled the sky with joyful-

ness; never had life seemed more glorious a thing. He shuddered again, remembering the horror of the drama he had just lived through, seeing the beauty, the sweetness, the goodness of all these things which he had so nearly lost, and perceiving the abyss into which his reason had fallen. And as he contemplated, in a garden near by, the brown branches of the trees, bursting here and there into leaf, and the green lawns with their shining grass, and the great sky with its sailing clouds, he understood that all the remainder of his life would not be more than he could spend in contemplation of these things. And he smiled with an immense pity for struggling mankind, as he reflected that neither the riches nor the glory after which we strive so passionately are worth the simple joy of looking upon Life.







